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Community Hospitals Reposition Themselves with Clinical Trials



Innovative, Progressive Care Is a Competitive Differentiator

by Sheryl S. Jackson

Twenty years ago, industry-sponsored clinical trials were conducted through academic medical centers. As pharmaceutical, device, and biotech companies pushed to get products through testing phases and onto the market, the value of opening trial participation to physicians at community hospitals became clear.

“Today, nearly 70 percent of pharmaceutical- and device-sponsored clinical trials are conducted at community health care settings,” says Shirley Trainor-Thomas, senior vice president of business development for GuideStar, a clinical trials management services company headquartered in Deerfield, IL. Moving clinical trials to community hospitals offers those pharmaceutical and device trial sponsors an opportunity to tap into a larger patient base because physicians are seeing patients five days each week as opposed to the two days an academic faculty member spends in a clinic. In addition, patients are more representative of those found in communities. “Also, community hospitals don’t have the bureaucratic layers of an academic facility, so decisions to offer a trial can be made more quickly and trials can be initiated [faster], sometimes in eight weeks versus four months,” Trainor-Thomas adds.

The benefit to patients is greater access to trial medications and treatments underwritten by the clinical trial sponsor, which means access to innovative therapies at no additional cost to the patient. There are, moreover, several benefits for a hospital that creates and markets a clinical trials program, says Trainor-Thomas. Hospitals can promote a clinical trials program as a way to attract and retain physicians. “Clinical trials also provide a new revenue stream as trial sponsors pay hospitals and physicians to provide protocol-specific services needed during the trial,” she notes. Increased patient volume also results from recruiting new patients who are interested in participating in clinical trials, which can range from diabetes or migraine headache management to new cancer therapies.

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While some larger physician practices can maintain research staff for the data collection, reporting, and oversight functions necessary for clinical trial participation, many community hospitals are establishing research departments to provide staff support for physicians who want to offer clinical trials to their patients but don't have the resources in their practice. "The increasing number of employed physicians in a community health system is another reason more community hospitals are establishing centralized programs," explains Trainor-Thomas.

Creation of a centralized program at McLaren Health Care opened clinical trial participation to all physicians, says Kevin Tompkins, vice president of marketing for the Flint, MI-based health system. "This has been a great tool for physician recruitment and improved physician loyalty," Tompkins notes. "Physicians look at the infrastructure we've built to oversee and support the clinical trial process to meet all the rules and regulations governing clinical trials, and they see it as value they can add to their own practices."

Clinical trials can also be a competitive differentiator, Tompkins points out. "Patients can receive the same research-level medications and treatments offered at academic institutions but can stay close to home," he says. That not only keeps patients at McLaren Health, but also keeps patients with local physicians.

"Many private practice physicians shy away from clinical trial participation because the administrative workload can be overwhelming," says Shawn Sams, RN, manager of clinical research for Owensboro (KY) Health. The centralized program developed by the health system handles all non-physician responsibilities, including registration of patients, marketing, and recruitment for trial subjects, along with all reporting responsibilities. Because Owensboro Health provides support for the time-intensive administrative functions, there has been a steady increase in the number of physician-initiated research projects and the number of investigators, according to Sams. "The hospital program also provides access to a wide range of trials through our participation in research collaboratives with other institutions," she adds.

Integrate research with overall marketing

Marketing clinical trials requires a different approach than marketing some service lines, Tompkins points out. "We don't run an advertising campaign specifically to promote our research efforts, but we do incor-

porate information about clinical trials into promotion of service lines that offer them," he says. At McLaren Health Care, the majority of clinical trials are oncology-related, so links to information about the research department and available trials appear on any Web pages a cancer patient or family member might view. In addition to listing available trials, online resources give contact information for the research department. "We also provide the information to all of our physicians so they can direct patients to the right place," Tompkins adds.

Trainor-Thomas notes that promotion of a clinical trials program on a hospital's website is critical. The site's navigation should allow visitors to find the clinical trials or research department in the same way they find any other service line. "In addition to navigation on the website, clinical trials should be embedded on all appropriate service-line sections to ensure the research message is consistent," she says. Having clinical trial links on appropriate service-line pages is also an important way to inform those patients who only visit those areas pertinent to their disease or condition.

"The only time we place consumer advertising related specifically to a clinical trial is to recruit patients for the trial," states Miguel Coty, vice president and chief marketing and communications officer for Martin Health System in Stuart, FL. "In most of our advertising or publications, we talk first about the core service and use clinical trial information to support the main message." Even if clinical trials are not offered in all service lines, there is a "ripple effect," Coty observes. "Public perception [is that] a hospital that participates in research and offers innovative treatment in any area must be a good health care provider."

Twice each year, Owensboro Health places articles highlighting the importance of research in the health system magazine as well as the local newspaper. "These opportunities allow us to educate the community about the value of research and our affiliation with Vanderbilt University," says Sams. The purpose of the communication is to let people in and just outside the health system's market area know they can receive the same access to new treatments they would receive at the university's hospital without traveling great distances.

Involve foundation

Another opportunity to spread the word about a clinical trials program is to turn to the hospital foundation.

“Health care research is something many people choose to support with donations,” Trainor-Thomas observes. “There is a trend for donors to want to see how their contributions made an impact locally.” Opportunities such as sponsoring a community health trial or giving to the development of a research institute give donors the satisfaction of contributing locally. “Not only is the hospital foundation a good source of funding for clinical programs, but the organization’s fundraising efforts and events reach a number of people other marketing efforts may not,” she notes.

An example of a community health clinical trial that became an ongoing community health program is a lung cancer screening program. “We participated in the National Lung Screening Trial that screened patients to build a database of patients at risk for lung cancer [but] who are currently asymptomatic,” explains Sams. Trial participants receive an initial low-dose CT scan and are then contacted at regular intervals. If they become symptomatic, they are referred to physicians for evaluation and treatment. “Because several insurance companies pay for the CT scan, we have continued to offer the screening for patients at risk for lung cancer,” she says. “We conduct the follow-up and make sure they receive care if they develop symptoms.” The research department conducts the screenings and handles the follow-up as a way to offer additional support to physicians who have patients who are at high risk for lung cancer.

Promote physician research

As research programs mature and physicians begin publishing their own results, health systems can publicize the results as a way to enhance the health system’s credibility as an innovative care provider, Coty observes. Newly published research is a timely, newsworthy item that is appealing to news editors and offers an additional opportunity to tie a hospital’s name to cutting-edge medicine.

“It is beneficial to the health system to publicize a physician’s research,” says Tompkins. “If the physician is publishing but not tying the research to the health system, you miss the opportunity to position the hospital and the physician as innovators.”

The positive effect of a hospital-supported research program on physician recruitment and retention is especially important to Martin Health System. The health system is opening an additional hospital in December 2013 as part of a medical park concept that includes a

number of pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies. The plan is to position the 90-bed full-service community hospital as a destination hospital for patients who want access to research-based, cutting-edge treatments. “Although some of the physicians on our current medical staff will move to the new hospital, the majority of the medical staff will be physicians new to our health system,” says Coty.

Coty notes that offering a strong tie to proven clinical protocols and access to new treatments will help the health system attract clinicians to the facility. “The health system has partnered with institutions like Moffitt Cancer Center at the University of South Florida as well as pharmaceutical companies for many years to offer best-practice clinical care. The opportunity to expand the ability to treat even more patients with the support of research is a great opportunity for new physicians,” he says.

“The value of a research department is the additional benefits offered to patients as well as physicians,” says Sams. “Not only can people stay close to their homes for care, but physicians have access to treatments that can help them better care for patients. This supports a more engaged, loyal medical staff.”

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