Compliance Today - August 2021
Post-pandemic vendor credentialing has been elevated to a compliance standard

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Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, hospitals and their staff have worked diligently to implement policies issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as state and local governments. The measures put in place—wearing masks, maintaining at least six feet of physical distance from others, avoiding crowds, proper hand hygiene, cleaning, and disinfection—have been aimed at slowing the rate of infection and preserving public health. Furthermore, healthcare providers must comply with additional requirements for infection prevention and control practices, such as active screening of all visitors for COVID-19 symptoms before entering a facility, as well as maintaining a record of all screened visitors.

One of the outcomes of COVID-19 is that infection prevention and control practices have been thrust into the limelight. Healthcare providers are under a more watchful eye from federal and state governments. They must demonstrate compliance with a growing number of mandates or risk significant fines. And even more interesting, they feel pressure from the general public to affirm that safety protocols are followed.

This focus on safety and infection control will not recede with the virus; rather, it will become another new post-pandemic normal. In collaboration with GHX, Orbees Medical recently surveyed more than 80 provider organizations and found that nearly 93% of respondents believe compliance controls will increase as a result of the pandemic. Further, both providers and suppliers expect greater enforcement of policies and requirements than in the past.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, hospitals were concerned about the growing complexity and volume of regulations. It's estimated that health systems, hospitals, and post-acute care providers spend more than $39 billion annually on nonclinical regulatory compliance.[1] The swell of regulations coupled with the anticipation of future outbreaks is pressuring compliance officers to rethink old processes and develop a more automated, standardized approach to manage credentialing and compliance.

The implications are clear: Even as the risk of COVID-19 subsides, compliance needs to remain top of mind with hospitals. Forward-looking compliance professionals will examine the lessons learned from the pandemic to improve compliance measures and operate safer environments.

Lessons learned during COVID-19

Without question, COVID-19 has provided a master class in risk mitigation.

First, the pandemic highlighted not only the importance of vendor compliance but also the challenge of ensuring vendor reps are always fully credentialed. Prior to COVID-19, it was estimated that half of all US sales reps spent more than 20 hours per year completing credentialing requirements. COVID-19 certainly didn't make this process more intuitive. As cases surged, hospitals canceled elective procedures and restricted access to nonessential personnel. Despite that, essential work carried on within hospitals, and certain vendor

representatives, such as respiratory specialists, were still required on site. To safeguard hospital staff, patients, and essential vendors, providers quickly implemented policy changes, such as documenting negative COVID-19 test results of everyone entering the facility, as well as ensuring vendor representatives had been properly fit for an N95 mask.

Both providers and suppliers faced significant challenges related to such policy changes. Providers worked quickly to keep pace with regulatory guidance, however, a lack of resources and insufficient investment in tools to enforce policies only compounded the challenge. Meanwhile, supplier representatives had to keep up with a changing set of requirements to ensure compliance.

Second, a lack of standardization around policies highlighted gaps that must not persist after the pandemic. For example, an absence of badging controls has resulted in the practice of issuing noncompliant badges to reps who are either unregistered or have missing and/or expired requirements.

Finally, given that COVID-19 affected every part of an organization, the most important lesson learned has been that providers must take a cross-functional approach to risk mitigation and compliance.

How modern processes and technology will pave a path

Moving forward, the industry's mandate is to modernize and centralize compliance processes, ensuring the right tools are in place to more effectively manage and report on compliance activities in real time. This approach will allow both providers and suppliers to implement best practices more easily as healthcare facilities reopen to more visitors and personnel, including the following.

Digital credentialing

Expect management of COVID-19 protocols for safety and protection to be done increasingly through contactless kiosks or mobile apps. A recent customer survey of healthcare providers identified kiosk or badging station capabilities as their top criteria, with 83% of respondents indicating this as an important factor for their vendor credentialing program.

Dedicated support

Compliance policies and requirements are varied and becoming more complex. Organizations must establish dedicated teams to ensure representatives are compliant with the latest policy updates. For example, compliance staff can monitor which reps have been inoculated with the COVID-19 vaccine, as well as those who need to receive the vaccine or declined it. They can also identify and investigate overrides for entrance, eliminating "free passes" for noncompliant representatives.

Integrate compliance with business planning

The process of managing enterprise-level risk needs to be integrated with strategy, business planning, performance measurement, and other business disciplines. It is imperative that hospital and departmental leadership engage in a cross-functional effort that embraces and enforces the rules and regulations associated with vendor compliance. Healthcare leaders must set compliance objectives and take actionable steps that can be measured. Furthermore, it is the job of executive leadership to push this message down throughout the organization, cementing the importance of compliance and proactivity.

Measure and monitor

Centralized credentialing systems will help provider organizations better measure COVID-19 risk. Digital check-ins can identify hospital ingress by vendors, visitors, and business associates, enabling the hospital system and staff to be aware of who is in the hospital system at all times. Other best practice compliance measures include ensuring representatives have flu vaccinations and tuberculosis screenings; receive temperature checks; and follow all necessary COVID-19 mandates, including the use of personal protective equipment.

Standardization

Healthcare providers should standardize processes in specific areas, including background checks, training, and inoculation. Standardization can also be identified as a necessity when discussing compliance. Compliance is an area that cannot take a back seat to other hospital functions since noncompliance and its variety of associated risks can adversely affect an individual hospital or an entire healthcare system.

Conclusion

The pandemic exposed how critical health and safety procedures are to healthcare organizations and the communities they serve. It also underscored the importance of adopting technology to modernize processes. The issue of access as well as the strict adherence to health and safety protocols will remain a priority well beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. It's a best practice for any infection control procedure, and a priority given that healthcare-associated infections cost the US healthcare systems $28–$45 billion annually.[2] By deploying technology to automate, simplify, and centralize credentialing, suppliers and providers will find themselves in a better position to fulfill the industry's mission and enhance hospital access to improve service quality and efficiency in delivering patient care.

Takeaways

- During the past year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, state governments, and local municipalities have issued an unprecedented number of policies and mandates designed to slow the spread of COVID-19.

- Hospitals and health systems have been concerned about the growing complexity and volume of regulations and the challenge of ensuring vendor reps are always fully credentialed.

- The article highlights the lessons learned about vendor compliance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Safe access and adherence to health and safety protocols will remain a priority even as the pandemic subsides.

- The healthcare industry's mandate is to modernize and centralize compliance processes to more effectively manage and report on compliance activities in real time.

1 American Hospital Association, *Regulatory Overload: Assessing the Regulatory Burden on Health Systems, Hospitals and Post-acute Care Providers*, October 2017, https://bit.ly/3gw4e0V.
2 R. Douglass Scott II, *The Direct Medical Costs of Healthcare-Associated Infections in U.S. Hospitals and the Benefits of Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, March 2009, https://bit.ly/3pZlYVo.

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