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Austin Radiological Association (ARA) is among the largest providers of outpatient imaging in central Texas, offering more than 100 radiologists with subspecialty training in interventional radiology, neuroradiology and neurointerventional surgery, body imaging, musculoskeletal imaging, nuclear medicine, pediatric radiology, digital mammography and women's imaging. With 17 outpatient imaging centers and 21 hospital locations in the area, ARA offers patients a wide range of imaging services.

The healthcare company traces its roots to 1954 when Dr. Robert Snider began work as the first full-time radiologist at Seton Hospital. In 1956, he began offering outpatient radiological services at a remodeled house in Austin. His equipment back then consisted of a diagnostic x-ray unit with fluoroscopy and two state-of-the-art radiation treatment units. His practice grew enough to hire another radiologist and became known as the Austin Radiological Group (ARG). It changed its name to Austin Radiological Association in 1968.

ARA's outpatient imaging centers offer everything from mammography to MRI, while its specialty centers, such as its Women's Imaging Centers (Central, North, and Kyle locations) and its Children's Imaging Center (pediatric radiology) cater to the needs of key patients. ARA has worked hard over the years to improve access to quality imaging services by developing strong relationships with a large number of insurance carriers and managed care providers.

Tidel Series 3 Smart Safe Provides Peace of Mind to Austin Radiological Association



The healthcare landscape has changed significantly in recent years. Many insurance plans have transitioned in a way such that patients are bearing more of the upfront costs of healthcare services by utilizing plans that have higher copays and higher deductibles. Such dynamics have led to a significant growth in the "self-pay" consumer. These are patients that pay for medical services in cash before their health insurance activates. The increase in the self-pay consumer has boosted cash payments at healthcare service providers.

Due to the higher influx of cash, healthcare organizations have found themselves facing the same cash issues as other retail organizations—how to manage it efficiently and effectively. That's the business challenge Austin Radiological Association (ARA) recently faced with the way it handled its cash pay patients. Tidel's Series 3 solution helped ARA transform its cash management system into a powerful corporate asset that's optimizing cash flow—thanks in large part to the program's ability to drive cash management efficiencies between ARA's point of sale system and its bank.

A Fast-Growing Company

ARA is one of the fastest growing businesses in Central Texas. ARA's growth comes courtesy of Austin's explosion in population. People have been pouring into the city at an unprecedented rate for several years. As a result, Austin is the eleventh most populous city in the United States and the fourth most populous in Texas.



The sustained influx of people has placed a heavy demand on medical services in the area, to which ARA responded by opening new imaging centers. ARA now has 17 imaging centers strategically located throughout the Central Texas area, with the longest distance between locations at 80 miles. Despite its growth, ARA utilized a manual system to handle cash payments. This system put employees at a higher risk and needed efficiency improvement.

Cash Management at Austin Radiological Association

Each ARA outpatient imaging center had a cash box that employees used to make change and store payments until closing. The cash was then stored in a safe until it was picked up by ARA's accounting department courier once a week, collecting the deposits from all the centers in a single run. At the end of the run, the courier was in possession of a significant amount of cash.

“Each site had a detailed closing process it executed to balance the money daily, which could take upwards of 20-30 minutes for completion,” says Leslie Ockman, ARA's Controller. “The money would be recounted by the accounting courier to ensure the cash picked up aligned with the cash receipt from the clinic. Any discrepancies would need to be brought to resolution.”

After the courier returned to the business office, the cash was stored in an ARA drop safe. ARA would consolidate the money, balance the deposits, and transfer the cash to the bank to be deposited. The cash often stayed in the safe for several days before being deposited, and could be delayed even more during busy seasons, increasing the volume of cash in hand.

“Utilizing our accounting employees to drive to 17 locations was not a productive use of their time,” says Ockman. “In addition, we had to manage the expenses associated with maintaining a vehicle for the collection runs.”

Safety: A Major Concern

While ARA's cash management system was adequate, employee risk while transporting the cash was a primary concern for the company. "Employee safety was always a major concern for us," said Ockman. "Our employees were exposed to risk in transporting the money throughout the process. Occasionally patients were in view of the cash at the clinic as it was being transferred to the courier. Our employees were also at risk in transporting the cash from clinic to clinic. We knew we needed to make a change to minimize our risks."



That change came when ARA brought in a new patient estimation system (PES) and interfaced it with its scheduling software. The PES processes patient benefits, charges and payments, pinpointing items such as deductibles, health insurance coverage, co-payments, and old balances. It also identifies any new charges that patients might have when they visit a clinic. With this new system, patients know what their out-of-pocket costs are for the visit and what other charges they owe, which they can pay for at the front desk during their visit.

While the PES streamlined bill estimation activities, it increased cash collections, increasing the challenges with ARA's existing cash management system. ARA decided it needed to make a change and assembled a management team to spearhead the selection process. ARA's entire operation was evaluated before recommending a service which includes a Smart Safe, deposit processing and consolidation, web-based reporting, and accelerated credit.

A Secure, Reliable, Auditable System

The heart of ARA's solution is the Tidel Series 3 Smart Safe. It offers organizations an easy way to secure and automate the depositing of cash, right at point-of-sale. With an efficient, simplified design, exceptional user experience, and network connectivity, the Series 3 was ideally suited for ARA's busy front desk environment.

The Series 3's key features include a 7-inch color console, simple menu navigation, and a single note validator connected to a cassette that holds up to 1,200 notes. Since it can easily connect to ARA's network, the Series 3 provides full visibility into all system transactions from one centralized location.

Pilot Program Proves Effective

ARA ran tests in three locations during a 60-day pilot program before deploying it to their remaining imaging centers. The company chose three imaging centers to test the Series 3's capabilities as a cash management solution and as a fit for the company. The three sites chosen demonstrated a measurable variance in cash volumes, so they were ideally suited for this pilot program.

The pilot proved to be successful, and ARA deployed the Series 3 solution throughout its remaining 14 imaging centers. Prior to installation, a site survey was conducted at each location to ensure a seamless transition on installation day, minimizing deployment time and patient inconvenience.

The deployment was successful at all ARA facilities, and the employees adapted quickly to the Series 3 due to the user-friendly design and easy navigation menu.



Streamlined and Automated Cash Management

The Series 3 solution streamlined and automated ARA's cash management processes and safeguarded employees from the transporting of the cash. The new solution allows for money to be deposited directly into the Series 3, with ARA getting provisional credit for the money as soon as it is deposited. Employees balance the deposits weekly to ensure the cash deposit aligns with the Smart Safe's deposit records.

Collections of the deposits from the imaging centers take place once a week or twice per month, depending on the imaging center and the volume of collections. The cash is then transported to ARA's bank, where it is deposited. The process is efficient and requires minimum involvement from ARA's employees, freeing them from counting, recounting, and auditing cash as well as eliminating deposit discrepancies. The new cash management system is extremely efficient while minimizing costs to ARA.

“The cost for the service, inclusive of the Series 3, is roughly the same as our payroll and vehicle costs under our old system,” says Ockman. “More importantly, the new program saves us time and productivity. That’s time our employees can devote to enhancing our patient care.”

Overall, the combination of the CIT program and the Tidel Series 3 Smart Safe provided ARA with a closed-loop cash management solution that improves cash management, optimizes cash flow, improves safety, and reduces risk, while minimizing costs. In addition, the CIT dashboard gives ARA a top-down view of the cash transactions with the Series 3 systems, including what denominations are coming into the imaging centers—a feature ARA uses to make sure its employees are following correct procedures.

Just What the Doctor Ordered

The Series 3 Smart Safes were just what the doctor ordered for ARA. They give employees a secure place to store the imaging centers' deposits and all large denominations of bills until the money is picked up. ARA employees are eliminated from the transporting process therefore eliminating the employee risk.

"Peace of mind is the biggest benefit of the Smart Safe," says Ockman. "We're no longer concerned about our employees' safety or the public's accessibility to our cash. Plus, we've cut down the time our employees spent counting cash and verifying deposits while saving the cost of fueling and maintaining our company vehicle—all while replacing an outdated cash management system with a more efficient solution."

In addition, ARA has boosted its protection against counterfeit notes and generated a gainful reallocation of labor. Meanwhile, the combination of accuracy and security just about eliminates the cash discrepancies at its imaging centers while continuously enabling a fully reconciled cash position. And, because the safes are integrated with real-time reporting capabilities with the bank, ARA receives credit for their deposits at the end of each business day, so its money is working harder for the company than ever before.

"The new cash management system is a welcome change and will be an integral component of our clinics as we continue to expand," adds Ockman.

