

Case Study



Upgrading: A Modular Strategy that Cost-efficiently Keeps Your Technology Roadmap Current

At a Glance

MCG Health
Augusta, GA
www.mcghealth.org

Solution Spotlight

- AcuDose-Rx® medication dispensing cabinets

Overview

Based in Augusta, Ga., MCGHealth is a world-class health care network offering the most comprehensive primary, specialty and subspecialty care in the region. MCG Health is a not-for-profit corporation that manages the clinical operations of Georgia Health Services University, including the 478-bed MCGHealth Medical Center, the Critical Care Center housing a 13-county regional trauma center and the 154-bed Children's Medical Center.

Tad Gomez, R.Ph., Director of Pharmacy at MCGHealth, just completed a one-year term on the Pharmacy Council Executive Committee of the University Health System Consortium (UHC). This leadership group provides to UHC-affiliated organizations the oversight and direction, tools and resources and best practices in pharmacy operations and services that improve quality of care, patient safety and overall medication use. The hospital has relied increasingly on automation to enhance pharmacy processes, most recently through a modular software upgrade strategy which Gomez helped to implement. He talks to us about how they have been able to keep their technology roadmap current without the financial headaches of major hardware changes every time the functionality is upgraded.

Challenges

By the time Gomez arrived on the scene in 2003, the hospital had been working with a broken process for almost three years. Two years prior to his arrival, the hospital was forced to upgrade to completely new cabinets (with CUBIES) because the vendor was sun setting its previous model. The new cabinets, which stored between 60-70

percent of medications, were located on all of the main nursing floors and were supplemented by medication carts. "The thought was that when we upgraded, we would use the CUBIE technology to go cartless and become decentralized. But the CUBIES never worked right, —at any one time, 30-40 percent of the CUBIES would be inaccessible because of unrecoverable CUBIE failures. The pockets would start failing and it would be like a virus that spread from the top to the bottom of the cabinet, rendering the pockets unusable. And we were still sending up unit-dose 24-hour carts for most of our patients and trying to load as many things as we could. Because of the issues that we were having, we were stuck in a quasi-cartless mode."

Answers

After bringing Cerner Pharmnet Millennium live as their pharmacy information system in 2004, the hospital focused its attention on the cabinets. "We had been dealing with CUBIE issues since the beginning, and I didn't really feel our existing vendor was giving us the appropriate amount of attention to solve our problems. We were coming to the end of our lease agreement in 2005; we would have to upgrade to new cabinets again in order to keep our technology current, so we decided to go out to the market and see what else was available."

"One of the things that stood out was the AcuDose-Rx drawer design, which seemed more substantial than the others we tested. Nurses by and large are very hard on automated dispensing cabinets and the equipment needs to be able to handle the wear and tear that a nursing staff puts

"I prefer the modular approach and feel it is much better on finances, staff and planning. With the sunset approach, you feel like you are only up to date for about one year and then for the next four years of the agreement, you are behind the times. You have to make this huge leap forward to catch up and then in less than a year you fall behind again. Whereas with incremental software upgrades, you are able to stay current without having to go through major changes to the equipment, nor do you have to ask for such huge capital dollars."

Tad Gomez, R.Ph.
Director of Pharmacy
MCG Health

on them. We were impressed with the reliability of the drawers and the service options available to us. Beyond the cabinets, we were really interested in integration between the wholesale and the automation side of the business. With our previous vendor, we never saw a lot of collaboration to make the automated cabinets more efficient. They tried a couple of things, but they didn't seem to be adaptable to many customers. What we witnessed with McKesson was that Automation and Distribution worked together to enhance the products and found value in that."

The Connect-Rx software upgrade options available with McKesson was another thing that impressed MCGHealth. With their existing vendor, upgrade packages were infrequent and often came without warning. "They did not do a lot of upgrades to the software and typically it involved upgrading the hardware too, which meant buying new equipment or entering into a new lease agreement. You had to upgrade or you had to switch vendors because they were not going to support what you were currently on. And they would often spring it on you, saying that when your lease is up you need to upgrade or we're sun setting this, so you need to upgrade. There wasn't a lot of lead time to be able to plan financially for that and I'd have to go tell my VP that I need X amount of dollars for this mandatory upgrade that I didn't know about yesterday. The McKesson sales force was very upfront about their upgrade process. We were told they are going to be incremental, and you always have the option to take the upgrade or not, up to a point where major functionality changes need to happen. We liked that it is up to us whether to accept an upgrade because it helps with the technology plan and lead time."

Results

The decision was made to go with McKesson's AcuDose-Rx, and 62 cabinets were installed in late 2006. The hospital had a financial incentive to switch everything over by year-end because the previous vendor's contract stated that they had to de-install everything by that time or they would have to go to a month-to-month rental on the old cabinets, in addition to

paying shipping costs to return them to the vendor. The deadline was met, and changes were noted immediately.

"Because the AcuDose-Rx cabinets are more reliable than the CUBIES, we now have 90 percent of meds in the cabinets and a lot higher volume of doses being dispensed than ever before. Last year, we processed about 1.6 million physician orders and are on track to process about 1.7 million orders this year. Our restocking process is more efficient because we have fewer people pulling and delivering medications, and when we added MedCarousel into the process, we were able to redeploy techs to other activities. From a medication safety standpoint, it has improved with the use of the handheld scanner because they are using barcodes the way they are intended." Efficiencies have also been achieved in planning for the future. "I like the flexibility of being able to choose when we upgrade, and with McKesson we get a lot of lead time so I am able to plan and get it funded before I'm behind the eight ball. So far I've taken two upgrades and skipped one and each of them was much smoother than we anticipated. McKesson has helped us a lot, and we almost have the upgrade process down to a science. In terms of adaptability for staff, we show them how the new functionality is going to change our process instead of having to teach them a whole new system."

But perhaps the biggest advantage to the modular upgrade strategy has been the ability to cost-effectively keep their technology roadmap current. "Dealing with an incremental approach just lends itself to being able to keep up. We're not having to buy new equipment all of the time, which is a tremendous advantage. The incremental costs of upgrades are more like an additional maintenance cost to be on the most current release of software. I'm on the latest version of Connect-Rx software, and I don't feel we need to have any major changes to the hardware because it is working, it is working well. But the best thing is that when our service agreement is up later this year, I'm not going to have to go to my capital equipment budget committee and try to sell them on a big outlay of money for new cabinets again this year."

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McKesson Automation Solutions

500 Cranberry Woods Drive
Cranberry Township, PA 16066
(724) 741-8000

www.mckesson.com