

Quality In Radiology

Quality is becoming a critical issue in radiology. Measuring and improving quality is essential not only to ensure optimum effectiveness of care and comply with increasing regulatory requirements, but also to prepare for impending pay-for-performance and similar value-based incentives being initiated in healthcare. Beyond these direct pressures to improve quality, there is also a professional obligation to pay attention. There is a growing perception that all radiologists provide an equivalent service globally and that cost is the only factor that need be considered in the marketplace. However, radiology services can distinguish themselves if they can demonstrate better quality.

So what defines quality? At Orange Coast, we have developed evidence-based, best-practice guidelines to help clinicians select the best radiologic test for their patients. Radiologists are active participants with exams tailored to the question to be answered. Technologists pay strict attention to protocol to produce reliable and reproducible imaging. New ASiR and other technologies have dramatically reduced radiation dose to our patients in CT and alternative MRI or ultrasound studies are offered as well.

Staff radiologists are fellowship trained and offer a broad array of services. Nighthawk radiologists are local (San Diego) and are subject to the same credentialing process as all the medical staff. 100% of nighthawk interpretations are overread. 5% of all radiology cases are actively peer reviewed. Computer aided detection and advanced 3D imaging software is utilized where appropriate. Critical and STAT results are communicated directly.

Quality improvement is a major focus of the department. Report turnaround time is measured. Scheduling services are integrated in the department. Procedure wait times are tracked. Voice recognition and structured reporting are soon to be implemented.

But quality is even more than this. Probably the best definition is: "Quality is the extent to which the right procedure is done in the right way at the right time, and the correct interpretation is accurately and quickly communicated to the patient and referring physician." Two way communication is key. Radiology needs to be integrated in health care delivery. At Orange Coast we have a tremendous tool in our EMR. Radiologists routinely view EPIC notes, results and problem lists while reading exams. Complete and timely input of this data by referring clinicians is necessary to assure relevant, contextual interpretations. More information provided to us with a request for service is always better than less and will help assure all issues will be addressed in the interpretation. In addition, radiologists welcome consultation with referring physicians to be sure the best test will be performed for their patients. Results are reported in many ways - by mail, fax, electronic report in PACS and EPIC and by direct phone call. Referring clinicians are encouraged to contact the radiology department so specific needs can be accommodated.

Quality measurement and improvement is an ongoing process at OCMMC. Ultimately, as radiologists, quality is not just our goal, it is our responsibility.