

Continuous Access to Critical Patient Information - Not a Luxury, but a Necessity

As good as technology is today, hospitals need a way to accommodate network and system downtime to insure they have continuous access to the vital patient information needed for quality patient care. Many healthcare providers have prepared for unforeseen disasters, but few have implemented business continuance solutions that seamlessly integrate into their daily operational processes for when the network or system is unavailable.

Network and system downtime, whether unplanned or scheduled, result in high operating costs and reduced patient care. According to research published by Healthcare Informatics, every minute of HIS downtime costs more than \$264 for an average 500-bed hospital. Each incremental 1% of downtime per year could cost a 500-bed hospital more than \$1.4 million.¹

Add that to the cost incurred by a patient that gets the wrong medication, dosage or diagnosis, and the price may be too much to bear.

The issue of business continuance and downtime recovery have changed over the years. Twenty years ago, most hospitals were comfortable with the idea that they could move back to manual systems during downtime periods and store their data at an alternative site if a true disaster struck. At that time, the most critical application was identified as payroll. As long as the staff could get paid, the operation would be able to continue.

Even as systems became more and more automated, the concerns seemed to focus more on data integrity and redundancy than the ability of the staff to operate without system availability. A lot of money has been spent on these solutions, and more is spent as the hardware and technology changes.

The introduction of electronic medication administration (eMAR) and the need for real-time positive patient identification has initiated a change in thinking. As these healthcare businesses depend more and more on information technology to automate the daily activity of patient care, downtime is no longer tolerated. Clinicians need 24/7 uptime for clinical applications that support online provider order management, access to patient care history, and EMR documentation of patient care delivery. Where downtime used to be an impediment to patient care, it can now actually be a threat.

Fortunately, HCIS vendors and the current state of technology have provided methods to improve uptime availability, redundant networks, and, especially, distributed storage systems. However, a gap still exists.

Any clinical workstation is only a wire (or wireless connection) away from being disconnected from clinical data. Whether it is faulty port on an Ethernet switch, a broken fiber-optic cable, or a full-fledged system crash, each device on the network can experience a downtime which can and will affect patient care.

¹Source: Anderson, M., The Toll of Downtime: A Study Calculates the Time and Money Lost when Automated Systems Go Down, Healthcare Informatics, April 2002.¹

It is hard to gather statistics about the number of network outages, but from our experience speaking with hospital IT staff, these happen with greater frequency than full-fledged “disasters”. Network outages, whether planned or not, impact the delivery of patient care just as much and more often than a disaster situation.

It has been noted in many articles and discussions that one of the impediments to the wide-spread adoption of the EMR is the continued concern about system and network downtime. Throughout many hospitals, even the most technically advanced, one can still find an enormous amount of paper being printed to prepare for downtime. Where this used to be a barely adequate replacement for online data access, it is an entirely inadequate replacement for today’s increasingly online clinical workflow.

To support today’s requirements of business continuance-being able to operate effectively even if the central HCIS system is unavailable either due to scheduled downtime or network failure - hospitals must look for solutions that provide automated, decentralized access to information without manual intervention. These solutions need to have information contained in the HCIS securely available on the local PC desktop.

Business continuance is not an option. Healthcare information systems contain too much diverse, critical information to rely on outdated, hard-copy reports. There is too much risk to rely on applications that only offer centralized accessibility, even if they are redundant. When clinicians need information in their hands, they need it now and to offer anything less subjects the hospital to risk that can easily be avoided.

To fully embrace the online workflow process that elevates the quality of patient care to new highs and reduce the associated risk of having all information only accessible via one centralized system, healthcare providers need to implement business continuance solutions that provide continuous, transparent access to this critical, information anytime the need arises.

Contact us to find out how our business continuity solutions can ensure your healthcare facility provides quality patient care even when there is a network or system outage.