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Making Women's Programs Work:

Strategies for a New Era of Health Care

Creating successful women's service lines has become an increasingly complex task as women's health services have expanded far beyond obstetrics and many options now exist for packaging and positioning women's services. Substantial opportunities exist for providers to design women's health as a comprehensive service line that meets the needs of women and responds to legislative imperatives by being accountable, accessible, and patient-centered. With female consumers the likely health care decision makers for themselves and their families and responsible for two-thirds of all national health care spending, women's health programs also have the unique opportunity to drive business throughout a health care organization.

What is Women's Health? Defining and Organizing Women's Services

The optimal set of women's services offerings will vary depending on the unique needs and demands of the service area, organizational strengths and weaknesses, and the competitive marketplace. The once obstetric-dominated service line has broadened to prominently feature a widening array of gynecological services and gender-specific care in all specialties such as primary care, oncology, and cardiology. Successful
women's health programs will make explicit choices about their strategic areas of focus and the associated service scope, while being true to the program's vision (see Figure 1).

Emerging national trends - like changing utilization patterns, new delivery models, opportunities for physician-hospital collaboration, and the principles of health reform - should be considered during program development or redesign (see Figure 2). Careful review of the collective impact of these indicators ensures that strategic choices are grounded by a comprehensive understanding of how internal and external dynamics impact the ideal definition and organization of women's services within a provider organization.
Packaging Women’s Services

Once the service mix has been selected, health care organizations need to determine how to package women's services in ways that are meaningful for consumers. Increasingly, health systems are organizing women's services by grouping similar female patient populations using a core defining characteristic, such as age. Examples include programs organized by life stage (e.g., adolescence, childbearing, midlife, golden years), disease/condition (e.g., women's cancers), or care/treatment modality (e.g., women's diagnostic centers or minimally invasive surgery centers). The breadth and depth of services may vary enormously depending on the size, location, and sophistication of the hospital or system. In fact, the key success factors of packaged models are less about an exhaustive list of services and more about facilitating interdisciplinary communication and linking inpatient and ambulatory care to deliver a coordinated patient experience.

Strategic Positioning: Strategies for Success

Actively differentiating a women's program in the market through strategic positioning is key to brand solidification and capitalizing on market opportunities. Key issues to consider include:

- **Success is about relationships.** The trend of women delaying
having children means that the majority of health care services they seek prior to age 35 or so is from a gynecologist and/or primary care physician. In addition, women tend to stay with their gynecologist for their obstetric needs, and use them as a referral resource for most of their other health care needs. Superior quality, value, and customer service will earn the loyalty and trust of female patients and referring physicians early in their relationship with a health care organization and will be critical to program viability.

- **Designing and leveraging a virtual entryway into women's services.** Websites are becoming the most common entryway to research, compare, and identify access points for women's services. Standalone women's hospitals or centers (i.e., a literal front door) are not necessary, but the perception of a highly visible entry point, even if it is a dedicated women's webpage or a women's services call center, support the perception of convenience and ease of access, factors that female consumers find particularly compelling.

- **Visibly bridging departmental silos.** Appropriate packaging of women's services helps ease concerns about cohesiveness among women's services, although more explicit organizational linkages are required to ensure true coordination of care among departments. For example, cross-departmental leadership positions that incorporate both administrators and physicians improve communication, organizational awareness, and collaboration. Organizations that can deliver on the promise of coordinated care will keep referrals within the system and retain female patients throughout their lives.

- **No two women are alike.** Programs that can adapt their offerings and positioning to fit the demands of their unique market, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach, are truly patient centered. Baby boomers want lifestyle preservation and to be in control of their care choices. Younger generations seem to rely on a blend of physician recommendations and independent research. Even within generations, socioeconomic status, education levels, and race strongly impact expectations and needs.

- **Strategically meaningful capital investments.** New facilities and high-profile amenities impact care-seeking patterns, but these capital investments should be scrutinized for how they will impact the most critical areas of strategic focus. Birthing Jacuzzis and 3D/4D ultrasound technologies make for flashy advertising copy, but unless inpatient obstetrics is the defined focal point of a women's services package, the returns will be short term and will not strengthen the core of the women's health program.

- **Foster and protect your identity.** A balanced and inclusive identity for women's health services that signals the ability to accommodate a range of needs across acuity levels and throughout the lifetime is generally ideal. As key differentiators
are identified for women's services, be careful not to hone in too narrowly on one concept that could potentially alienate key market segments - whether it be too high touch or overly focused on high-risk scenarios.

With unprecedented levels of change occurring in the health care industry, now is the time to consider conducting a thorough strategic review of core business units and determine whether program viability is at risk. Women's services are a particularly appealing candidate for analysis and review. A renewed identity and vibrant role for women's services is likely to have far-reaching impact in strengthening the organization's other clinical programs and boosting the bottom line.

For more information on conducting a strategic review of women's services, contact Katherine Cwiek at 215-399-1876 or kcwieck@hss-inc.com.
Join Craig Holm for his upcoming webcast

The Power of Primary Care in an Era of Change

January 25, 2011

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12:00 – 1:30 p.m. (Central)
11:00 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. (Mountain)
10:00 – 11:30 a.m. (Pacific)

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- Understand how the role of primary care is changing and its impact on care delivery
- Align with physicians for care coordination vs. care provision
- Determine whether physician employment is right for your organization
- Stand out with your physician recruitment and retention as the competition gets tougher
- Evaluate the cultural capability of your organization

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