

# NO QUICK FIX

**N**ew computers and software can streamline business and health-care activities, but are the benefits of this technology worth the costly investment for the average home health-care provider? How can new computer systems and software packages be used to better serve the needs of patients and suppliers?

Pete Tanguay, president of Management by Information, Little Rock, Ark., had some answers. Speaking at ASHP's recent Home Care meeting in Boston, he said that home care providers must first dispel some myths about technology before they can hope to gain from it.

For one thing, said Tanguay, people believe that they can employ an easy technological trick to save their businesses. He cautioned against looking for a quick fix, likening it to the foolish belief that you can lose fat while you sleep. In his opinion, providers can't miraculously turn businesses around by simply implementing hand-held or laptop computers. Nor can they expect dramatic improvements in productivity.

### Stay in touch

Furthermore, Tanguay doesn't believe that people should feel pressured to invest in technology just because they fear being left in the dust. The chances of that happening are very slim, he emphasized. Conceding that technology is moving swiftly, Tanguay went on to assure providers that they aren't "going to wake up one day and be out of date" if they just stay in touch with their profession.

He also told providers that their current policies, procedures, and systems aren't necessarily extinct or unproductive. Sometimes the old way of doing things is more cost-effective. Providers should evaluate their systems and see if they really need to change.

Tanguay said providers often think they must achieve 100% automation and buy equipment from one vendor. He encouraged them to look at the possible return on investment to avoid overspending. "It may cost \$100 to get 90% automation and another \$1,000 to get 100% automa-

## Technology can help, but it's no miracle worker

tion. Sometimes 90% automation is pretty darned good," he quipped.

Tanguay also told providers they don't have to rely on one vendor to meet their needs. They can look to several different vendors to create the automation that best suits their businesses. "If you look at hospital systems, you're hard-pressed to find one that uses the same software vendor for radiology and labs and pharmacy and surgery scheduling and ADT and so on. Health care has never been a single-vendor marketplace," he noted.

Tanguay also explained that there are many proven technologies available today. Computers and software currently used by banks and shipping companies can be manipulated to fit the needs of the home care industry. "Some of the best technologies available today are proven technologies. We don't always have to go off and be a beta site for somebody and implement these 'bleeding-edge' technologies, as people have called them, in order to improve our technological position," he said.

Tanguay pointed out that many of the accounts receivable systems under development will fail, even though they are fairly simple programs that require no technological innovation. He warned providers about developing new technology without first calculating the risks. "A pioneer, according to Webster's, is one who goes before and prepares the way for others. Some people say that you can tell [who is] a pioneer: he's the guy who has arrows in his back."

Although he alerted home care providers to some of the difficulties they face in implementing technology, Tan-

guay didn't want to discourage providers from trying. As difficult as it may be to invest in new technology, it is necessary to do it wisely in order to compete. "In my opinion, as hospitals become a larger player in the overall home care market, they're going to bring a significant investment and understanding of technology. People who came into home care as a stand-alone home IV company, and aren't as sophisticated, are going to have a real challenge on their hands."

### Remember three things

To achieve success, home care providers must remember three fundamental things when implementing and applying technology to their services. First, Tanguay said, they must insure that there are close ties between the business and the information systems. "You've got to make sure that you have a technology group that understands technology and people that understand business, and that they talk to each other."

Second, the technology should improve customer service, Tanguay told his audience. "If you really want to measure how effective your technology is, make sure you have some sort of customer-service measurement." Tanguay added that many large firms on the forefront of technology measure their technology management's performance using some measure of customer service.

Third, a home care provider should insure that employees are able to use and understand the technology that is being incorporated into the business, he said. "When you put this technology in, how well does it fit the way your people work, the way your people think?" An untrained employee may be intimidated by a new computer or software package and may refuse to use it. In such a case, the technology will be useless.

Tanguay concluded by reinforcing the idea that home care providers must strike a balance between growth and strength. "The biggest challenge you have as a provider is to bring on new technology but to keep things stable—to keep things working, to keep the cash coming in, to keep the patients living, to keep the patients with a high quality of patient care, to keep relationships with managed care providers very effective."

**Karyn Snyder**