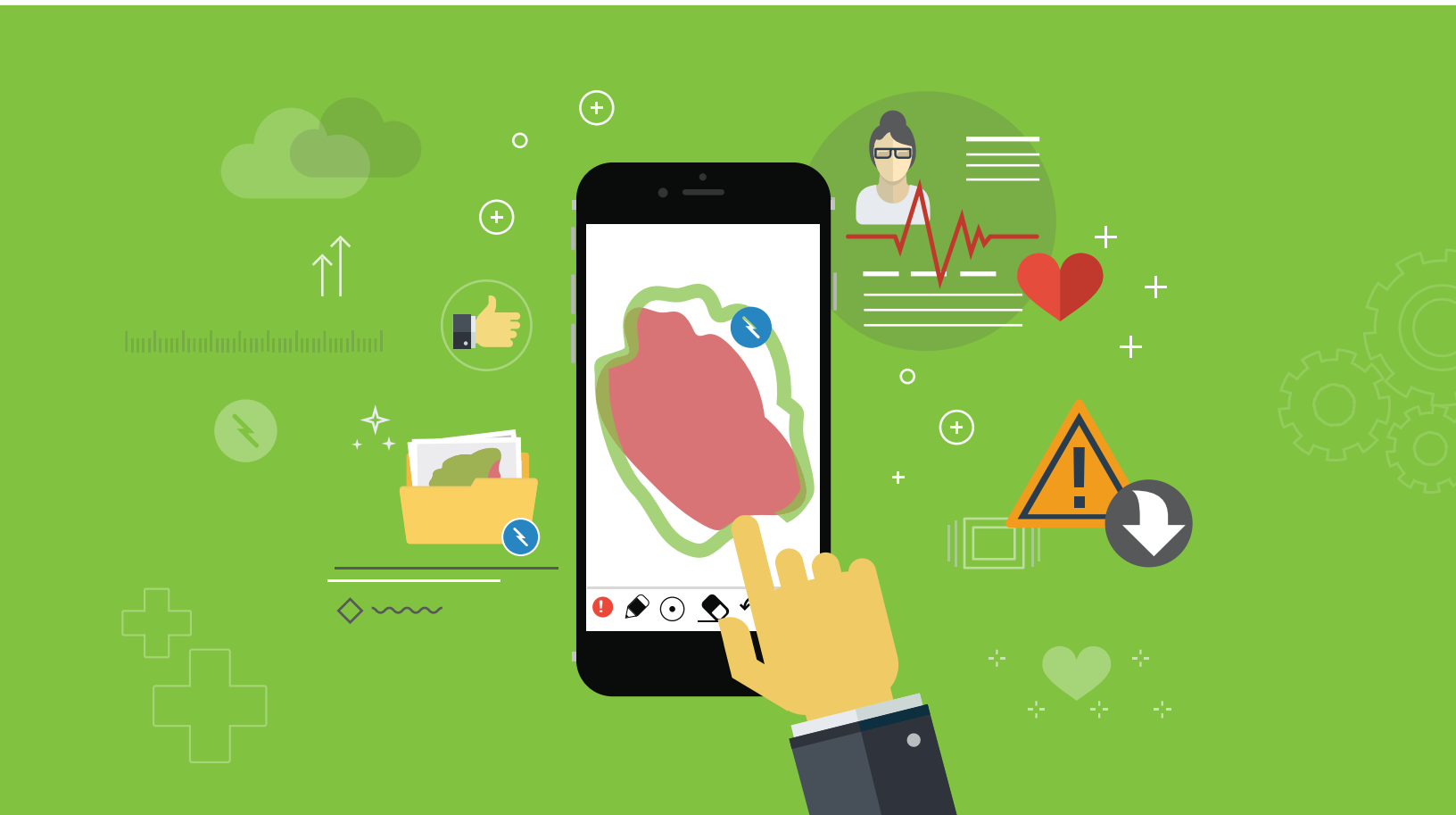


The Modernization of Wound Management in Long-Term Post-Acute Care: Using Photography to Improve Care and Reduce Risk



Wound care is a source of significant risk and challenge for Long-Term Post-Acute Care (LTPAC) providers and their residents. More than one in ten residents in nursing homes in the United States develop a pressure ulcer.ⁱ In addition to the increased risk of a re-hospitalization and the significant costs associated with wound treatment, wounds and wound care can result in litigation for LTPAC providers.ⁱⁱ

Providers have made significant progress in their management and treatment of wounds but there remains opportunity for improvement. The use of advanced digital technology as part of a wound management solution represents a major opportunity for LTPAC providers to provide better care and quality of life for their residents. The clinical benefits associated with advanced digital planimetry-based wound

care solutions are well documented.ⁱⁱⁱ Accurate digital measurements of wound state and progression provide valuable data and a more complete record of care to enable more timely and effective treatment.^{iv} Improved treatment outcomes will reduce the incidence of claims and a complete record of care integrated into the EHR will strengthen the defense of claims that do arise.

This whitepaper provides an overview of the benefits of a wound care solution that integrates digital technology and educates providers to understand and mitigate those risks most commonly associated with the use of photographs in the delivery of health care. It addresses the key impacts of photography in litigation, and how to achieve high levels of consistency in photo quality and practices, in compliance with privacy and security considerations.

The Benefits of Enhanced Digital Photography to Clinical Wound Care and Treatment



There are significant and undeniable clinical benefits to be gained by integrating digital photography and planimetry in the care and treatment of wounds. These include enhanced accuracy in the measurement of wound surface area, improved coordination of care providers, and better tracking and communication of ongoing care and wound progression.

Accuracy in Measurement

Significantly more precise than manual wound measurement, advanced digital planimetry imaging technology can result in error rates up to 44% less than manual ruler-based measurements and much higher inter-rater reliability.^v This is significant because clinical studies show that changes in the surface area of a wound can be a strong predictor of healing.^{vi} The ability to evaluate a wound's progression more accurately helps providers to make better and more timely treatment decisions, and communicate those interventions to the care team.^{vii} Improved clinical outcomes from access to these tools will reduce the incidence of claims.

Improved Care Coordination

The use of a photography-based solution improves coordination of care among clinicians.^{viii} Accurate digital images of a wound can be readily shared electronically among the care team and external wound specialists. Where a wound solution is integrated into a facility's EHR, a wound specialist can securely review accurate and current digital images of the wound from a remote location and immediately authorize necessary changes in treatment, such as pain medication or alternative wound dressings. The more timely the intervention, the better the healing outcomes.^{ix}

Better Communication and Continuity of Care

By providing graphic evidence of wound healing, the use of a photography-based solution educates residents and family members and increases compliance with care.^x With accurate photographs of the wound, clinical staff need not remove complex dressings and expose the wound which can risk infection and be uncomfortable for residents. With a clear record of the status and progress of all wounds, time spent by facility staff on paper reporting decreases and high risk cases can be identified earlier.

Three Common Arguments Against the Use of a Photography-Based Wound Care Solution

There are several perceived risks most commonly associated with the use of a photography-based solution for wound care, despite its many benefits.



Wound photography will result in adverse litigation outcomes.

As the use of mobile digital photography becomes ubiquitous, wound images may already form part of the clinical record or the litigation evidentiary record. Accurate, detailed and consistent photographic records of a wound and its treatment improve care and the record of care, and as a result can reduce claims /liabilities.

Photographs have long been considered to make a defense attorney's job more difficult because explicit and shocking photos tend to arouse the jury's sympathy for the plaintiff and anger at the provider.^{xi} But wound photographs are becoming more prevalent, whether providers are ready or not. Acute care providers now regularly take photographs that can become part of the clinical record arriving at a post-acute care facility. Photos are also increasingly taken by a resident's family and friends. These photos show only a snapshot in time, often when the wound is at its worst, and are often of dubious quality. Providers who present a series of wound photographs that accurately and consistently show the progression and treatment of a wound over time can better defend the care provided in the event of litigation and reduce the risk of claims being brought in the first place. This visual record can be a powerful tool for defense counsel.^{xii}

The use of digital planimetry and photography to measure and track wound progress helps to ensure consistency and completeness in the clinical documentation of the wound. Wound assessments performed manually by different staff members within the facility or at the hospital can result in inconsistency in charting, with staff reaching different conclusions about the wound's stage, progression or measurement. This inconsistency makes it more difficult to provide the highest quality of care, and to defend the care actually provided. It can be portrayed in litigation as incompetence or worse, an attempt to obfuscate. Any ambiguity in the clinical record of care can be construed against providers in litigation, leaving defense counsel battling against that ambiguity rather than defending the case on a clinical basis. Wound photography integrated into the EHR helps provide an objectively verifiable record of care. Measurement is done more accurately and consistently, photographs are time-stamped and there is less reliance on subjective descriptions of wound progress. There is a clear record of communication to physicians and wound care specialists of updates in wound status and treatment. All of this information can be produced directly from the EHR to help the provider substantiate its wound assessments not only in the event of litigation, but also in connection with surveyors, audits and organizational reviews.

By employing a technologically advanced and clinically comprehensive wound solution, providers can shift the focus of wound care photography from emotional to clinical. Sharing photographs of a wound with a resident and family members can increase engagement and be used to build understanding, trust and confidence. Involving residents and families in medical treatments decreases the risk of claims and litigation.^{xiii} It also prevents damaging claims that the family was not told of the existence or extent of the wound. It helps to combat a narrative often used by plaintiffs counsel that the facility was trying to hide substandard care and cannot be trusted. Further, a wound care solution implemented proactively can also help providers establish that a wound was acquired elsewhere and not in their facility.^{xiv}



Wound
photography
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Using specific operational controls and best practices, facilities can simplify and standardize wound photography so that it is consistently high-quality, reliable and auditable.

By implementing specific operational controls and best practices providers can leverage wound photography to improve quality of care and document that care clearly and consistently.

- a. **Establish clear written guidelines on when and how photographs must be taken.**^{xv} Photographs should be taken at the time of admission, as soon as a wound or potential wound is discovered, and at specific intervals (for example, before or after cleansing and debridement). A wound care solution can be configured to send alerts when an additional wound assessment, must be carried out. This helps staff ensure that wounds are assessed consistently and in accordance with clinical best practices.
- b. **Designate a wound care champion and a small team of nurses to take and manage wound photographs.** Relying on a small team of nurses, whether or not they are specialized wound nurses, to take photographs and manage the solution helps to improve photograph consistency and compliance with an organization's clinical policies.
- c. **Train and re-train.** Provide comprehensive training, consistent retraining, and validation of the nurses designated as wound photographers including photographic techniques and best practices for photograph intervals. Additional training efforts will be offset by time savings from
 - (i) reduction in efforts to document wound care and integrate it to the EHR,
 - (ii) simplified access to and sharing of wound photographs, and
 - (iii) reduced need to remove and re-apply dressings.
- d. **Standardize the method of photography.** Nurses designated as wound photographers should take photographs that are as consistent as possible. A digital photography-based solution can help to maintain consistency in a number of ways, such as by automatically adjusting lighting and providing specific instructions on vantage point and distance from the wound.
- e. **Monitor adherence to best practices using the wound care solution.** An objective, visual record kept in one place makes it easier to monitor wound care and treatment, including frequency and currency of photographs and ongoing wound progress.

The use of these practices will result in higher quality, more consistent photographs, which in turn will result in better wound care.



The privacy and security requirements for wound photography are too numerous and complicated.

A technologically advanced wound management solution can make compliance with the regulatory requirements for mobile wound photography achievable with minimal change to a provider's operations.

Resident photographs taken by a health care provider for care purposes are considered protected health information (PHI) if they identify or could be used to identify a resident.^{xvi} The inclusion of any names or resident identifiers in the photograph will result in the photograph being PHI. But even without naming identifiers, a photograph of a wound that contains any visually-identifying features, such as a unique mole or scar, will also be considered PHI. Once a photograph is considered PHI, it becomes subject to the requirements of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act and must comply with the following:^{xvii}

- (i) the photograph must go into the correct resident's chart;
- (ii) the designated record set, both written and photographic, must be formally identified;
- (iii) a camera containing PHI that is not encrypted must be emptied in a timely fashion; and
- (iv) all resident-identifiable information must be encrypted at rest.^{xviii}

All of these requirements can be met through the use of an integrated digital photography-based wound management solution. By integrating directly into its EHR, a provider will reduce the risk of accidental photograph loss or misfiling and will have the ability to track and audit.

Prior to implementing a photography-based wound care solution, providers should ensure that they obtain consent from residents to take and store wound photos,^{xix} as well as adopt a policy that clearly indicates that wound photos taken are part of the designated record set.

Conclusion:

Technology has fundamentally shifted the risk-reward relationship between LTPAC providers and the use of photography in the care and treatment of wounds.

The clinical benefits of a technology-driven wound care solution employing digital photography and planimetry to measure wound surface area, track progress and manage care cannot be overstated. This technology, particularly with its integration to a provider's EHR, will also result in an accurate, complete and objectively verifiable record of care to help providers more effectively defend against claims. Employing this technology enables providers to position themselves as leaders in evidence-based care, deliver better care to residents, and improve transparency – the most effective tools to mitigate legal risks and defend claims.

Questions? Click here to connect with us.

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