

Not a Bad Word, in This Case

Outsourcing Surgical Equipment a Viable Option for Ophthalmology

By Gabe Molina

In many places around the country, outsourcing is considered a dirty word, an outward sign of a troubled economy. In the outpatient surgery field, however, outsourcing medical equipment — particularly for cataract and refractive eye surgery — can not only save money, but is a matter of convenience.

“We wanted to be able to provide care to patients in their local community without them having to travel,” says Jamie Monroe, MD, a cataract surgeon at Cataract and LASIK Center of Utah in Orem, Utah. In many cases, Monroe travels to various rural communities to provide her services. “Not everyone can come to the facility where you usually work because of transportation issues or because of insurance issues.” Monroe chose to use Sightpath Medical, an outsourcing equipment provider based in Bloomington, Minn., from a previous experience she had with them while at another practice in Kentucky. “It allows me to provide care at a hospital when I otherwise wouldn’t have the opportunity to take care of that patient’s surgeries.”

Jim Tiffany, president of Sightpath Medical, says Monroe’s case is similar to many of his clients. “Our service offers these facilities an opportunity to offer cataract surgery to their patients without having to invest all of the capital dollars for the specialized equipment for cataract surgery, and without having to have surgical nursing staff well-trained and up-to-date on cataract surgery techniques.”



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Robert Smith, an operational manager at Ambulatory Surgery Center of Marshfield Clinic in Marshfield, Wisc., felt the pinch of trying to keep up with new equipment. “It was just the expense and frequent turnover of the equipment — capital expenditures that we have for this highly technical equipment with regards to the cataracts and glaucoma cases we do here at our ambulatory surgery center,” states Smith. “It was quickly changing and turning over every two years, and we kept continually investing in these changes in technology.”

His predecessor decided to use Sightpath Medical 5 years ago, a positive experience that encouraged Smith to retain their services. “Our volumes here are high enough that we are a fixed site for them and came to an agreement that was very nice for us with regards to keeping our expenses in line to where we needed them, where we can at least be reimbursed and continue to generate revenue for our organization.”

A Helping Hand

Another aspect of outsourcing is providing the labor to not only assist the surgeon in performing a procedure, but also to maintain the equipment being used—a feature that Sightpath also provides.

“I think it’s one of our points of differentiation from other services in the cataract area,” Tiffany points out, noting the 2-year certification program that is used for their surgical technicians. “We have certified scrub technicians. They go to school and receive certification as a CST, and they have to maintain ongoing continuing education, etc. So they’re literally certified to work in the operating room as a surgical technician.

For Smith, having a Sightpath surgical technician available makes life a little easier for the rest of his staff. They have one dedicated technician that’s available three days a week, but can also appear at other times during the week, depending upon the center’s caseload.

“When she is here, she is just like one of our staff,” declares Smith. “She does all the stocking. She does all the ordering, ensuring that we have all of the lenses and the instruments here. If instruments need sharpening or exchange, she does all of that. She is in the rooms helping our staff turnover rooms and prepares the room and the patient for the next case for the surgeon.”

Monroe agrees, “We consistently have the same surgical technicians, who provide the equipment and provide their expertise. They set it up in the operating suite at whatever hospital or surgery center we’re working at and their service is consistent throughout the surgery. And when we’re finished at the end of the day, they pack it all up and make sure it gets to the next destination safely.”

And what about the nursing staff in dealing with Sightpath technicians? Not to worry. Tiffany replies, “Often, the local nursing staff will be initially reluctant to have an outsider come in and be working and scrubbing in their operating room. But what they almost invariably find is that we take a lot of stress off of their nurses.”

Top-Notch Equipment without Putting a Dent in Your Bottom Line

Surgeons love to have the best and newest surgical equipment in use for their procedures. “As surgeons, we, as a group, tend to like the new equipment with all the ‘bells and whistles’ etc.,” says Monroe. “But that’s been one of the things that’s been really easy to work with. (Sightpath) really do provide whatever you need. And they work very hard to provide the latest and the greatest.”

For many healthcare facilities, keeping top-of-the-line surgical equipment comes with a high price tag. “...Virtually nowhere will a surgeon operate if there isn’t both the primary phacoemulsification unit and a backup machine, as well,” notes Tiffany. “So that runs \$125,000. You also have to include \$55,000 for an ophthalmic microscope that’s only specifically used for cataract surgeries, plus another \$5,000 for handheld microsurgical instruments. All told, you’re looking at a minimum of \$185,000 each time you want to change out obsolete equipment.”

So when it comes to choosing equipment, Smith and his staff continue to choose Sightpath because it’s all about keeping expenses to a minimum. “For me, as a manager, I know what my expenses are going to be per case for this.”

And in this era of high gas prices, many shipping companies also charge an extra fee to ship surgical equipment. Sightpath assumes all those expenses, simply by using their own equipment. “If I were frequently

ordering certain supplies and (equipment), then having them shipped here,” Smith articulated, “the shipping costs would be really high, because they have increased significantly. Often times, with shipping larger items, many of the shipping agencies are adding a gas fee to their charges.

One concern for practices considering outsourcing is the reliability and sterility of the equipment moving from one place to another, according to Tiffany. “We of course, sterilize the hand pieces that are utilized. The phacoemulsification machine uses a needle on the end of the hand piece, and that’s a sterile disposable or a minimally reusable item that we might use on a case day, but not move from facility to facility. Sightpath also has a number of customers considered to be fixed-site customers, where the equipment is left on site, with supplies and a technician brought in on a case day.

In the end, outsourcing surgical equipment is able to make Smith rest easy when it comes to his practice’s bottom line. “It’s just another way that I can manage my expenses. I can manage my staff differently to lower those expense burdens to the organization.” □



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