

# CONTEMPORARY LONG TERM CARE

## Spotlight on Software progress report

BY SAM ADLER

The following article appeared in Contemporary Long Term Care magazine.

*Heath A. Odom is president of The Integrity Group, Inc., a Minneapolis-based senior health care technology advisory firm. A former executive for a major software firm, Odom and his partner, Shelly Krautbauer, founded the Integrity Group to address what he saw as provider frustration with the software industry's "lack of support."*

### **Why does long term care lag behind other industries in embracing technology?**

**Odom:** Number one, our industry doesn't have a lot of money. We're not like the acute care industry, with significant revenues that we can put into IS [information systems] technology. Second, the vast majority of our software vendors are small firms themselves, so every time a new regulation comes out, they have to throw huge resources at addressing it and therefore can't focus on developing new and better products.

At the same time, many of the products available today are as good as our industry can take: Your average nursing home has no IS department and a very limited budget. That's why we wouldn't recommend a really high-end acute care system or a very sophisticated product for them because it would be too difficult to operate.

### **Is our industry at a technological turning point?**

**Odom:** The industry is moving away from DOS and other character-based systems, and most senior health care programs are being rewritten to some type of a graphical user interface product. These new products are requiring that providers upgrade their hardware.

### **Have concerns about Y2K been a driving force for change?**

**Odom:** Very much so. It's been another factor in forcing providers to evaluate their current technology and, in most cases, to upgrade it. It has been a good thing to move them off the dime, if you will.

### **Where's the greatest current need?**

**Odom:** Strong accounts receivable systems that integrate with exceptional clinical products. A big provider may have the expertise to tie the two together, but your typical home will either settle for an inferior product that does both or do duplicate keying and entering.

### **We've been talking mostly about SNFs. Don't assisted living operations have different needs?**

**Odom:** Yes. In the past, a nursing home software product could be manipulated to accommodate the needs of assisted living. However, as the assisted living marketplace matures, reporting requirements have increased. Today, software vendors have developed a complete suite of products to meet those needs. But getting these products to interface with the operations of other business entities has created challenges.

### **What hurdles must providers overcome in getting up to speed?**

**Odom:** Aside from budgetary constraints and the limited software solutions available, providers need to rethink the way that they approach IS technology --- not as a necessary evil but as a powerful tool. Providers must be creative in how they use it to improve their operation. Most facilities only use 30 to 60 percent of their systems and, in fact, the solutions to most of the complaints we get about existing systems can be found within the systems themselves. Maximizing a system's potential requires considerable staff training.

### **Are new products user-friendly?**

**Odom:** I prefer the term "intuitive," and the answer is no. A nurse should be able to sit down and figure out that if I push this button, I can do an MDS. Instead, we are constantly faced with software products that attempt to do too much. This often creates complex screen layouts, buzzwords galore, and systems that probably demonstrate wonderfully but, two months later, the staff has reverted to doing only what is required to make them work. Now we're seeing some of the vendors back off and make software a little bit simpler. Making systems intuitive is more important.

### **How is the role of the Internet playing out?**

**Odom:** So far, its impact hasn't been as great as in some industries, but that will change. The Internet will allow providers to download patches and enhancements in a more timely manner. Better still, vendors are moving toward on-line solutions that will eliminate the need for providers to buy expensive hardware or form an internal IS department because the applications operate from the vendor side. I think you'll also see more on-line user groups and improved vendor support through the use of e-mail. Industry associations and government agencies are already doing a nice job developing their own Web pages.

### **What kind of advances are on the horizon?**

**Odom:** I think you'll see more data-entry devices --- more touch-screen and hand-held devices, for example, as prices are driven down. But we can't keep dreaming about these things until we get the fundamentals down pat.