Process for the Implementation of an Automated Phone Tree at Beth-Israel Deaconess Medical Center (BIDMC)

*A single telephone number was developed by BIDMC for physicians to quickly get in touch with 12 different sections within the radiology department and ensure communication is delivered to the appropriate person.*

- Referring physicians at the radiology department in BIDMC found it was difficult to get in touch with radiologists when they wanted to get information on what was the most appropriate type of imaging test. Spearheaded by radiologist Ammar Sarwar, MD, the team effectively revamped communication by creating an automated phone tree.

- Radiologists are able to answer questions pertaining to all modalities and imaging. Similar to other specialties, radiology has expanded into multiple subspecialties. BIDMC radiologists are specifically trained in their subspecialty so if physicians called the abdominal imaging reading room, they would not be able to get an answer about a question related to a chest CT.

- Physicians found it was frustrating to have so much information yet so little time, and with physicians taking care of patients on the floor, it is time consuming to find the correct reading room. BIMDC created a phone tree and gave pagers to all radiology residents, so when a caller has a question and is not able to get through on a phone line, they are able to page the person directly and ask them the necessary questions.

- There are over 11 different numbers for the department of radiology, where a radiologist is present. Initially, phone numbers were printed for all relevant sections and physically shown on boards around the hospital where interns or residents were present. However, despite this effort there were a large number of misrouted phone calls, where callers would call the same two numbers and ignore the phone numbers they were asked to call.

- Medical house staff at BIDMC developed a wiki site where all pertinent information was listed and given to residents. However, when physicians were walking floors and in between patients they preferred to call a general number, rather than go online to look up the correct number. It became necessary to have a single phone number with an automated phone message that would correctly reroute callers.

- When this idea was proposed, IT staff at BIDMC explained it would be difficult to set up one number for two separate campuses (a block apart from each other) since there was only a fixed number of telephone lines or bandwidth that allowed communication between both campuses. They were
concerned that if one number was given to both campuses it would tie up the bandwidth between the two campuses because the volume of calls would be so high. In addition to this, some radiologists felt that this would increase the number of phone calls they received on a daily basis.

- The IT department monitored the pilot test closely and discovered the volume of phone calls actually went down because people were directly calling the correct number, rather than calling multiple phone numbers before reaching the correct one.

- Once the phone tree was official, the radiology department selected the number of phone numbers and the radiologists’ preferred contact numbers. The phone tree was set up with 21 different phone numbers and the caller was able to talk to a human voice within two presses of the button. The wording for the phone tree was very short, since referring physicians are pressed for time.

- Since there are instances when a radiologist is not available, the system is set up so that instead of leaving a voice message callers can page a radiologist and the radiologist will get back to them at a later time. If a call isn’t answered within five rings the referring physician has the option to also page the radiologist.