

CASE STUDY

3 strategies for a successful sleep apnea therapy program: Lessons from ENT TX's ASC partnership

A joint venture partnership between The ENT & Allergy Center of Texas (ENT TX) and Stonebridge Surgery Center, a local ambulatory surgery center (ASC), made it easier for both organizations to improve access to Inspire therapy for regional patients. After determining that Inspire is safe, effective, and financially viable, both organizations successfully boosted patient volumes and successfully treat patient with sleep apnea through increased procedural efficiency at the ASC and strong connections with sleep medicine clinics.

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Read time – 15 min

Audience

- Hospitals and health systems
- Physicians and medical groups

Overview

The challenge

Until Inspire therapy became FDA-approved in 2014, the surgical options for obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) were limited to surgeries with a longer recovery time and lower success rate than Inspire. While Inspire improves outcomes for many CPAP-intolerant patients, it has a unique set of administrative considerations: Beyond Inspire's safety and efficacy, ENTs and their partners must determine if the procedure is operationally and financially viable for their region and site of service. While developing partnerships with sleep medicine clinics is essential to identifying patients and efficient long-term care for Inspire patients, many ENTs don't have strong historical partnerships with sleep medicine and must establish new relationships to succeed.¹

The organization

The ENT & Allergy Centers of Texas (ENTTX) is a private practice with 12 providers and four advanced practice providers (APPs). Among other services, ENTTX provides balloon sinuplasty, sinus surgery, and the Inspire procedure to the Dallas-Fort Worth area and Northern Texas. ENTTX has a joint venture partnership with Stonebridge Surgery Center, an ambulatory surgery center (ASC) founded by seven patient-centered physicians.

The approach

ENTTX's joint venture partnership with Stonebridge aligns the interests of the ENT surgeons and the surgery center, making it easier for both to make decisions that positively affect patient outcomes and increase efficiency. ENTTX worked with Stonebridge to determine whether the procedure would meet the needs of OSA patients in their region, would be reimbursed broadly by insurance companies, and was safe to perform in an ASC setting. ENTTX connected with local sleep medicine organizations to foster an environment where mutual referrals are the norm.

The result

ENTTX and Stonebridge found that offering Inspire therapy was a good fit for both organizations: Inspire is a simple and safe procedure, is well-reimbursed by insurance, generates high patient satisfaction rates, and requires equipment that's readily available in most ASCs.

ENTTX performs over 80% of Inspire procedures in the ASC, and the consistent staff and setting has allowed care teams to develop one of the most efficient Inspire processes in the country. Also, because the joint venture partnership meets private partners needs, Stonebridge gets consistent patient flow from ENTTX and sleep medicine. To accommodate high patient demand, Stonebridge is in the process of expanding the number of operating rooms, and ENTTX is planning to train more Inspire implant surgeons.

Approach

How ENTIX and Stonebridge Surgery Center built a thriving Inspire program

To improve access to Inspire therapy for OSA patients, ENTIX leveraged their joint venture with an ASC to raise the efficiency of their workflow and help patients get the testing they need to assess eligibility for the procedure.

Three strategies to develop a thriving Inspire program

01 Create a strategic partnership with a local ASC.

02 Demonstrate the business case for Inspire at an ASC.

03 Foster trusting relationships with sleep medicine clinics.

01 Create a strategic partnership with a local ASC

The ENT & Allergy Centers of Texas (ENTTX) have a joint venture partnership with Stonebridge Surgery Center, a regional ASC where ENTTX has been doing procedures for the last 12 years. Because several ENTTX physicians are also partner-managers at Stonebridge, their organizational interests are aligned. This dynamic makes it easier for both organizations to make decisions that improve patient outcomes and increase workflow efficiency.

The ASC setting creates opportunities to improve efficiency. Whereas a hospital may have a different surgical team for each patient undergoing the Inspire procedure, the ASC can provide the same team every time. That consistency means the surgical team is so familiar with the Inspire procedure that they can safely build efficiencies into the process to improve patient experiences.

More than 80% of ENTTX procedures are done at Stonebridge, but some patients with complex comorbidities or conflicting insurance coverage may require a hospital setting. Because most OSA patients have comorbid health conditions, dedicated nurses at Stonebridge handle all pre-procedure clearances and work with schedulers at other practices to make sure all patients have had the right tests, so they can evaluate whether the ASC setting is right for each patient.

>80%

Of implant procedures are done at the ASC.

“ There’s something to be said for having the same staff every day at the ASC, where the scrub tech, circulating nurse, and anesthesiologist are all familiar with the procedure. It really helps.

– **Shane Pahlavan, MD**

Otolaryngologist

The ENT & Allergy Centers of Texas

Although a joint venture partnership with an ASC isn't feasible or desirable for every provider organization, aligning organizational practices with each ASC's interests can still be beneficial. Efficiencies, like shortening procedure time and decreasing time of pre-procedural clearance, will make it more likely for ASC administration to see the implant procedure as value-added.

How the interests of a provider organization and an ASC align

The ENT & Allergy Centers of Texas

Consistent surgical team makes procedures more efficient.

ASC nurses evaluate patients to ensure the ASC is the right setting.

Referrals to ASC are seamless for providers and patients.



Stonebridge Surgery Center

More efficient procedures lead to increased capacity and volumes.

Reduced liability and increased patient satisfaction.

Consistent business from ENT TX and sleep medicine boost volumes.

02 Demonstrate the business case for Inspire at an ASC


Before launching the Inspire program, ENT TX worked with the ASC to ensure that the procedure would be clinically and financially viable in the long-term.

ENT TX and Stonebridge first assessed the clinical relevancy of the Inspire procedure for the region, including whether the procedure would help improve the quality of life for patients with OSA, who often go untreated or undertreated. Importantly, Stonebridge evaluated whether their patient base was vulnerable to intraoperative complications or complex post-operative care that goes beyond the capacity of most ASCs. On the business side, Stonebridge reviewed insurance coverage and reimbursement in relation to the cost of the Inspire device, pre-authorization requirements, and equipment needed for the procedure.

Once a case is made that Inspire therapy is a net benefit for surgeons, patients, and ASCs, it will become much easier for ASCs in different partnership configurations to decide whether offering the Inspire procedure is right for them.


Questions ASCs ask themselves before offering a new program or procedure

Clinical

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Is the procedure clinically relevant to the patient population? Will it improve access to care and patient quality of life?

 - Stonebridge found that many OSA patients in their region couldn't tolerate CPAP therapy and were undertreated due to a lack of alternatives. Inspire therapy now provides a safe, effective option that can improve those patients' quality of life.

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Are patients in the region good candidates for receiving the procedure at an ASC, accounting for age, comorbidities, and the potential for intraoperative or post-operative complications?

 - Stonebridge found a strong base of OSA patients in their region who were both intolerant of CPAP-therapy and were candidates for the Inspire procedure in the ASC setting.

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Are area surgeons interested in offering the procedure and willing to become credentialed in the Inspire skill set?


 - ENT TX surgeons trained in Inspire therapy are near their max capacity for performing the procedure due to high patient demand. ENT TX plans to train and credential several interested surgeons on staff in the Inspire therapy.

 Has the procedure been successful and received positive patient feedback?



Stonebridge found that the clinical data for Inspire therapy showed positive outcomes for most patients who choose the procedure. Subsequent feedback from their own patients about Inspire therapy has been overwhelmingly positive.

Administrative

 Will the procedure be covered by insurance? Are there processes in place to obtain pre-authorization?




Inspire therapy is broadly covered by most U.S. insurance providers. Inspire also has an in-house team dedicated to resolving issues with reimbursement and prior authorization.

 Does the ASC have the right equipment for the procedure?



Like most ASCs, Stonebridge already had most of the equipment needed for the Inspire procedure in-house, so they didn't have to invest a lot of capital to do the procedure.

 Is there industry partner-supplied training and support available for the program or procedure?



An Inspire representative is always available to help Stonebridge access training and credentialing programs for the procedure, as well as insurance reimbursement and prior authorization support.

03 Foster trusting relationships with sleep medicine clinics

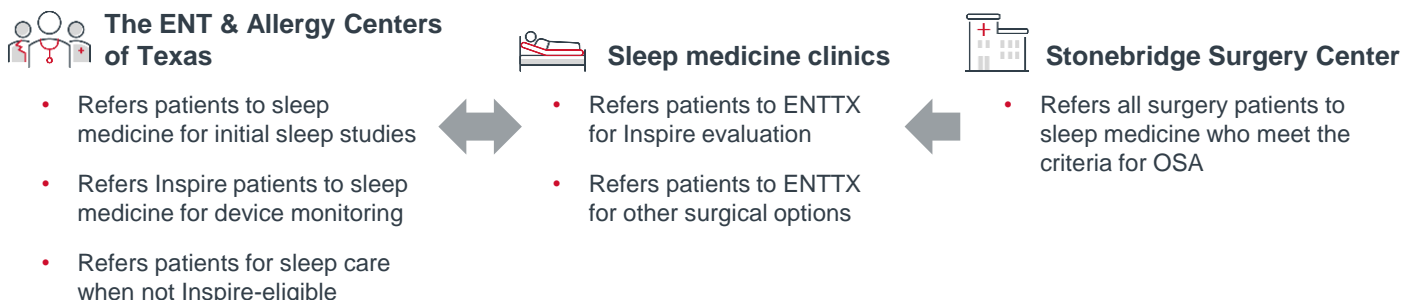
ENTTX took care to develop relationships with sleep medicine clinics based on mutual referral and trust. Sleep medicine clinics sometimes view surgical procedures like Inspire with skepticism, because they are concerned about losing patients. Surgeons from ENTTX visited sleep medicine clinics in person to emphasize that sleep medicine clinics are essential to the process — handling sleep studies, monitoring or adjusting the Inspire implant, and managing OSA patients who aren't eligible for Inspire.

To help build a seamless referral process, ENTTX partnered with several private sleep clinics such as Dream Sleep Medicine. ENTTX refers patients who don't already have a sleep provider to Dream Sleep for initial sleep studies, Inspire device adjustment and management, or further care when ineligible for Inspire. Also, although sleep medicine usually activates the Inspire device, ENTTX has chosen to activate the device before sending the patient back to sleep medicine for monitoring and adjustment. Due to this co-management process with Dream Sleep, ENTTX patients experience an efficient process and excellent outcomes.

Many other sleep medicine clinics also partner with ENTTX to evaluate their patients for Inspire therapy. When patients are already established at a sleep medicine clinic, ENTTX sends them to their original sleep care provider. In addition, Stonebridge pre-screens patients for all surgeries using the STOP-Bang score for OSA and refers patients who meet the criteria for OSA to a sleep medicine clinic for evaluation.

A consistent patient flow is beneficial for all parties involved, particularly for private practices that must generate their own referrals — unlike practices affiliated with larger health systems.

Partnerships with private sleep medicine clinics lead to seamless patient experience in the post-implant care pathway.



Results

How we know it's working

With a high success rate at ENTXX, Inspire therapy has changed the sleep apnea treatment landscape. In addition to the following outcomes, ENTXX and Stonebridge have substantially increased patient access to the Inspire therapy and are in the process of expanding the number of available implant surgeons and ORs.

6.0

Median apnea-hypopnea index (AHI) of ENTXX patients using Inspire (as compared to a 35.4 AHI pre-implant).

200+

Implant procedures performed at Stonebridge in the first five years.

>80%

Of implant procedures performed in the ASC.

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If you can offer a better product and a better service for your patients, you will win. And that leads to a positive return on investment.

– Urooj Waheed, DO

Anesthesiologist
Stonebridge Surgery Center

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Endnotes

1. Note: Unless otherwise specified, all information in this case study came from Advisory Board interviews with officials from The ENT & Allergy Centers of Texas and Stonebridge Surgery Center.



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Project consultant

Amanda Okaka, MPH
okaka@advisory.com

Contributing researcher

Kristin Strubel

Content writer

Jennifer Fierke

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655 New York Avenue NW, Washington DC 20001
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