Podcast Transcript

Risk Never Sleeps Episode 82 Micheal Jefferies

Ed Gaudet: Welcome to the Risk Never Sleeps Podcast, in which we talk to the folks that are on the front lines protecting patient safety and delivering patient care. I'm Ed Gaudet, the host of our program, and today I am pleased to be joined by Michael Jefferies, the chief information officer at Boulder Community Health.

Michael Jefferies: My pleasure to be here.

Ed Gaudet: Hey, Mike. Yeah, good. Good to meet you. And there's a lot to cover today. We spoke briefly before we started to record this. But let's start off with, tell us about your current role in your organization, your health system.

Michael Jefferies: Yeah, I'm a chief information officer at Boulder Community Health. We're a kind of a midsize health system with a hospital and about 30 different specialty or clinic locations, from primary care to cardiology, neurology, really offering a broad spectrum of care. In my role, I oversee everything from information security and our program there, as well as project management, business, and clinical applications, patient applications, really everything that, I like to say, everything that has a plug-around health care. We're involved with, whether it's medical devices and medical device security or it's the application that patients use to schedule online and look at their results. That said, I've been there about eight years, and it's a wonderful community, non-profit organization.

Ed Gaudet: Okay. And how big? How many beds roughly?

Michael Jefferies: It's about 185 beds and growing as we're expanding to a substance use disorder. And we do about $450 million in revenue. About 60% of our business is outpatient or clinic-based, which is a little different composure than most hospital systems that are more heavily acute. We have a good mix of in and outpatient.

Ed Gaudet: Okay, great. And we talked a little bit about your background before we started. I'd love to hear more about your journey. You started off in cyber, you said, or at least you did a lot in cybersecurity at one point in your career. And now you're the CIO. And I know listeners would love to understand that journey.

Michael Jefferies: Yeah, it's been an interesting one. I've always had a technical background, and my first start was at an EHR vendor called McKesson back in the late 90s, early 2000s. And so I started off doing, answering phone calls for support and doing support tickets, and at that point got into some Linux and ... Hp-ux security, network security at the time. And then from working at the EHR vendor, I got into consulting and outsourcing, where we implemented systems all across the US and private cloud infrastructure. So we really worked on securing those environments in a private cloud that was based out of Michigan, which I was really fantastic because we could serve health systems that were maybe in more rural locations that had trouble getting access to world class technology, and we could support them. And so that was really interesting. And I worked from the application side, technical side, project management, and then from there started working a little closer to the provider side. And I came local to a local hospital system called Longmont United Health. It's now part of the Centura or Commonspirit and was a head of applications there, as well as the vice president of IT eventually. And now I've been in my current role for the past eight years; it's the chief information officer. There's been some security kind of sprinkled throughout that responsibility throughout that career. Most recently have really overseen the entire security program from a governance and IT perspective as well.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah, I think I was at Imprivata, I think was Longmont, Imprivata customer.

Michael Jefferies: Yeah.

Ed Gaudet: I thought so. Yeah, way back in the day. Yeah. So a lot going on obviously over the last couple of weeks in the wonderful world of cyber, most importantly, the Change Healthcare incident and breach, and any interesting learnings or perspectives that you'd love to share with listeners given that?

Michael Jefferies: Yeah. I think my first reflection on this was something that we were already focused on prior to it, which is that third party risk is a major threat to our organization. I think sometimes we spend too much time looking at our own security and not that of our partners, and both doing all the strategies of mitigating and transferring and just really looking at the risk that we have with our third parties. And we might trust too much sometimes. And I think sometimes we work especially with larger organizations, we might feel they've got billions of dollars. I imagine they have their cybersecurity together. I think really thorough diligence is important there. But one of the interesting things about that breach for us is that we are a direct customer for certain Change Healthcare products, but the vast majority of the impact to us was through vendor partners that we had, who were customers of Change Health. Now, to be clear, if someone has their data breached in that chain, they're going to look at us because we were the originating source of that data being collected into the system. And in a lot of ways, we're accountable. And yet this is maybe a second or third degree removed from us is actually where the breach happened. And yet we're going to have some level of accountability. So I think there is a bit of a mess to be sorted out here around who's the covered entity, who's the business associate, who's reporting to the patients that they were breached. And that information, frankly, has been, I think, too slow to come from Optum and Change Healthcare. But I think that's some of the interesting things with that particular incident.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah. At some level, it really raises the bar for making sure that folks understand the reach that a vendor has in an organization, what tendrils really are there and to what impact

Ed Gaudet (cont'd): And so that relationship you have with your business partners is so crucial to get a full landscape and picture of that. How do you work with your business partners like legal risk or internal audit? I'm sure some of those report into you or maybe adjacent, but I'd love to understand that approach that you take.

Michael Jefferies: Yeah. We follow the practice of separating compliance and legal and information security as a kind of a separation of duties and powers, so to speak. But we work really closely together. And so information security reports into me as the CIO. But we also contract with an external virtual CISO, which is helpful. And really it's not, I say it's a virtual CISO, but surely an external firm that can augment our capabilities when needed. So we have an internal program we run, but when we run into an incident, we have people we can lean on to help us as well. And so our partnership with legal and compliance is really a close one. And so whenever there's an incident, we immediately work together on that. But also when we're doing an investigation of, hey, this recently we were assessing a software we were considering bringing in has some AI components. And really we had some concerns about how Phi could be getting into that data model and how well it's being filtered out. And would it be possible that our Phi could get into a data model that is then serving other customers? Right? And the sort of leakage that could happen. And so then we had a good robust conversation with legal around the implications of that and talking about the risks of that. So we work really closely together. They're actually wonderful partners and fairly knowledgeable as well.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah. And that's a really relevant topic, AI and how folks are actually dealing with AI coming in from a number of different paths into the organization. You have your new customers that are bringing it in, but you also have your existing partners, vendors, third-party products, etc. that may be updating their solution to take advantage of AI. How are you dealing with that? A lot of organizations I speak to set up these governance structures that are cross-functional. Are you doing that as well?

Michael Jefferies: Yeah. We are leveraging our Information Security Governance Council to govern AI and is putting reviews through there because that's the same appropriate group. Then sometimes expanding ad hoc with other technical experts.

Michael Jefferies (cont'd): Our approach to this has first been to really educate our users around AI, make sure, as an egregious example, that nobody's cutting and pasting a patient record into ChatGPT to see what ChatGPT thinks about it, making sure that they're understanding that when you put confidential information into a large language model or other AI, you're likely donating it to the model. And so a lot of this is education, and we want to enable the business, but we first want to really make sure that they're aware to come to us first with that. So that's been pretty successful. We've had a few people that are go-getters and want to try things out soon, and we're trying to work with them on that. One of the challenges I think we have is that, a lot of us have a philosophy of business needs really come first and we need to balance that with risk. And it's one of the tenets of the Cobit framework and other things. But I think for us, there is a real urgency to getting relief to our providers and nurses and other users who need that efficiency to take better care of patients. There's really a greater good at play here, but if we roll being extremely cautious and very rigid on needing perfect security, we're really going to be a barrier to those business needs. So one of the great challenges I think we have, and many other people have right now, is leveraging AI at the right speed, with the right amount of caution amidst unclear security requirements. People are still figuring that out are really changing legislative landscape as well. They're very interested in making sure AI is in a black box of diagnosis that's influencing or creating bias and patients and diagnoses. We're trying to go at the right pace there to enable our business with the right amount of caution.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah. That's great. And the ONC is going to be doing a lot of work in that area obviously, with a label of transparency for AI technology and components. You brought up regulation. Really good segue into the next question. You've been following. I'm sure the HHS, the cybersecurity performance goals that were announced last year and are being implemented and being legislated currently. How are you thinking about that organizationally, as you think about your resources and your ability to actually manage to the CPGs?

Michael Jefferies: I think for us, we're largely relying on our partners to be cautious of this. And I, if I were to get a headline from what the ONC is looking for here, the biggest thing they are cautious about is making sure that we are not codifying bias into AI models. And part of my background is in public health.

Michael Jefferies (cont'd): This is something that's near and dear to my heart, where I really do not want us to train a model on a certain population and then impose that upon a broader population to which it does not apply. And I think to that end, we need to be very careful. I think that is the biggest thing that I think we're being careful with. And this is something we need to work with our partners about. As far as the other security regulations were largely working in tandem with our partners to make sure that we're following the current regulations, I do feel like there's a bit of a gold rush from AI vendors to get into the market and beat the regulations to market, so to speak, that they're in there and in place and embedded before the regulations come to pass. And I think that puts us in a tough spot, because we don't want to be in a spot where we've implemented something and spent a good amount of money and are utilizing it, and suddenly it's out of regulation and we've got to rein it back. So again, it's pacing our implementation to what we feel is a reasonable amount of risk for our organization.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah, that's great. So look at the, over the next 12-24 months. What are your top three priorities, as an organization, as a leader?

Michael Jefferies: Yeah, I'd say the number one priority for us as an organization is really provider efficiency. And this is something I would say everyone has talked about in healthcare and other industries as well for many years. But if you look back on the past few decades, we've done, we've made amazing progress on making our processes electronic. When physicians enter orders, rather than writing them down and passing to someone, there can be a transcription error and maybe a less robust checking, they're putting them in electronically. When it comes to documenting the patient encounter, the providers actually having to do that more directly versus maybe a scribe or greater Ma or nurse involvement historically. We've shifted a lot of the burden forward or higher to a higher level of licensure. It is time we take a heat of that and say we need to ease that burden. I want to be clear, I think that's made things a lot safer, right? Because when the provider is putting in a medication order, we're doing real time medication allergy checking, we're doing a lot of thorough checking there, we're able to do closed loop medication where we're making sure that we're delivering the right med, the right route, the right time. But this has largely been a shift of an increase of work. And I think there's been some commitments of efficiency. And let's just be real, I don't think this has created efficiency for most of our providers.

Michael Jefferies (cont'd): I think maybe some of the front end speech and macros, or what they call doc phrases and made them a bit more efficient. I think it is now time to focus very strongly on provider efficiency through use of things like AI, but other ways too. What can we do to reduce documentation burden and make it easier? That's my more thorough way of saying this year, our top priority will be making meaningful improvements to provider efficiency. And then beyond that, we're really looking at our growth strategy within our market. And so that's, our population, our region is aging rapidly and moving into the kind of Medicare age. And so we want to make sure that we're creating capacity in our area to be able to support that, both from staffing processes and physical plant.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah, I know that's a great point. You did a lot of work on burnout as well and creating frameworks to ensure that you could manage through that. And any last minute or last thoughts for listeners when it comes to managing burnout on a large scale?

Michael Jefferies: Yeah, I think, listen, there's a lot that's been said about burnout, and I think you're going to have to bring in food for people, provide a meditation app. If things are good, but they are not the answer. I just, let's be clear. I think when someone is actively hurting from burnout, it's about their workload, it's about the nature of their work, it's about finding joy in work. And so we need to find real solutions there. And so that means meaningfully addressing their needs. For physicians, I feel like a lot of us have been dealing with the deluge of email for well over a decade as part of our job. Now, physicians are also getting the deluge of secure messages from their patients. And it's additive, right? So we need to find a meaningful way to deal with that rather than just say, Hey, we'll give you a meditation app and buy you lunch. You've got to find a way of how can we have other staff manage and triage those messages so that the the physicians aren't bearing that whole burden? And this can apply to every level of staff. For our staff, specifically within the technology staff, it's been a high priority for us. And the way that we manage that is really focusing on the mission, reminding people of the work they do. And this has gotten especially more difficult as we've become a largely remote workforce. But making sure that people can stay connected to their mission, that we rotate them through so that they can see what it's like in the emergency department, so that they can see the magic of a heart catheterization. It's amazing stuff.

Michael Jefferies (cont'd): And when you see that you're part of that, I think it really gives you the motivation to go above and beyond in your work, and you find joy in your work. And I think those are some of the meaningful things we have to really focus on.

Ed Gaudet: I love that connect back to the shared mission, which is how everyone, that's why we all got here. We all work in health care for that shared mission that is unique. It's unlike any other industry. And reminding folks as often as possible, That's why we're here, I love that. Let's get to you now a little more about Mike. Over the last couple of years, it's been a tough couple of years for folks. What do you personally or, and, or professionally most proud of?

Michael Jefferies: I think professionally, what I'm most proud of is a team that we put together. And if I was to give advice to anybody who is looking to succeed as a leader, I would just say you really need to focus in on the people of your culture first. And that means not shying away from being fully engaged in the hiring process, not shying away from when someone is perhaps not a good fit for the team. But we really revamped our organization, and I thought at the time that it might cause some consternation and a dip in morale. But what I found is when we raised the bar on our team and we said, we really said, You have to be exceptional to be a member of our team. What we found then is that employee engagement scores went through the roof. They found that they felt special to be a part of that team and that everyone was really pulling their weight. And I'm really proud of that. And so I could list all of the accolades my team has achieved since then, and which, I'll brag a little bit, it's extensive, but the reason for that, the whole reason that we've achieved all those accolades because we've got really smart people at the top rating that. And so we've created a really collaborative culture of good people that believe in the mission. And I think that's really where I'd focus most. And I'm really proud of the group of people that we've put together and the ethos that they have as part of that team.

Ed Gaudet: I love that, and held them accountable for it too. I love that combination. Outside of health care and IT, what are you most passionate about? What would you be doing if you weren't doing this job?

Michael Jefferies: I'm very passionate about mental health care. I completed my doctorate in health administration and policy, the Doctorate of Public Health, last year, and my area of focus was on using technology to improve the identification of substance use disorder and then getting people assistance for treatment. Amidst the pandemic, we've seen just an explosion in overdose deaths. This is something that was already a brutal epidemic before the pandemic hit. And then I think it pulled us away from that focus. And it was, we were just starting to make a dent in the amount of deaths. And then we hit record deaths in our country during the pandemic. And it was a bit obscured because we were so focused on the pandemic. So I do think we need to look at this when people are living with substance use disorder or they are, or someone dies of an overdose, the spider web of devastating consequences in the community and those families is just unspeakable. And this is something we really shouldn't be accepting as a country, and I'm truly passionate about that. I think, I try to work with the community on that and do what I can professionally as well. Since I spend so much time in front of a computer like this or working on a computer, I love to get my hands dirty. So my other passion and love is rebuilding old motorcycles and working in the garage. And so I love to be able to do that and take something that's beat up and maybe not running and spend a while working on it and getting my hands dirty. And I also found that teaches me patience, because that's one of those things where if you go too fast, you end up breaking things that cause you more work than fixing it and just being methodical and thoughtful. And that's my meditative time, is really just focusing and thinking about things in the garage, which I appreciate.

Ed Gaudet: Have you read Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance?

Michael Jefferies: Yeah, one of my favorites.

Ed Gaudet: One of mine too. I was in 2016. My last motorcycle was, I was at a music festival, and a friend of mine, we rented Indian Chiefs and we attempted to head out to Joshua Tree, and the winds were just too fierce. So we ended up turning around and going back to Indio. But.

Michael Jefferies: There's something about that freedom. And I will say, I don't know. And I found that I thought I was a bit weird, but I don't think I am all that unique and that I enjoy my time working on my bike in the garage just as much as I do, getting out there and riding it. And they're two very different things. But they are two things that I love very much. It seems like I'm not alone there.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah. And I think with a bike too the connection mechanically to the bike and the ride I think is unlike a car, I think at some level. There are people that are mechanics at car level. But I think with a bike you really have to because you can get stuck anywhere and you've got to be able to understand what the hell's going on and at least try to fix it on your own to get yourself out of trouble. So, 20-year-old self, what would you tell your 20-year-old self if you could go back in time. And that was like last week for you, right?

Michael Jefferies: Yeah. It's a funny topic because my oldest daughter is graduating college right now. Oh, congrats. Thank you. I'm really proud of her. And the poor girl has had to put up with me, probably projecting, giving all sorts of advice that is probably more directed at my 21-year-old self and rather than her. But of course, I'm trying to give her as much advice. Almost, I'm running out of time to give the girl advice. She's becoming an adult and I, what did I forget to tell her as a parent? But I have no shortage of advice that I'm trying to give her. But I think that the biggest thing that I would try to convey to myself or to anyone that age is: always be the one holding your own rudder and steering your own ship in your career and in your life. I think so many times people end up in relationships or careers that aren't putting them on the path that they really want to be on, and rather than steering, they're floating along, and there's a time to go with the flow, and there's a time to say, I want to steer in a certain direction. And I think, never underestimate the importance of just standing up and having the courage to set your own direction around where you want to head, because it is sometimes easy to get, to fall into the pattern of you wake up, you go do your thing, you maybe get promoted and you work in a certain way, but are you steering towards where you're really, truly happy and where you feel you have a great purpose?

Ed Gaudet: Great. I have three daughters. I had a similar, this same conversation with my oldest this weekend about this topic as well. And yeah, it's, and I think it's tougher for them than it was certainly for me anyway. But this notion of, and don't beat yourself up because it is a journey and things get revealed throughout that journey. So I love that. Also, this is the Risk Never Sleeps Podcast. I'd have to ask you this question. What's the riskiest thing you've ever done?

Michael Jefferies: Man. We've already talked about motorcycles. I'll put it this way. It's a big question for me because I am a person who gets denied life insurance escalation because of my motorcycle and rock climbing and skiing habits.

Ed Gaudet: Oh, geez. Okay. So you're.

Michael Jefferies: Well, I'm a liability when it comes to risk, at least personal risk. I will simply, since I know my wife doesn't listen to this, I'll try to hide it from her actively now. I'll just say I've traveled at a speed that no human should go in a car or in motorcycle. And I enjoyed it. That's my admission.

Ed Gaudet: What have you climbed, Zion?

Michael Jefferies: I have not, no. We do a lot of rock climbing in the Boulder area, which is an epicenter here, which is wonderful. And in addition to loving it, I stopped doing it for a while as my kids were young. But what I found is that, and you might appreciate this as you have daughters, as they got older, they loved it too, and I was able to go with them and we could take turns belaying each other. And I would say the metaphor of entrusting your life to each other, one at a taking turns where one person's belaying and you're trusting them to save you if you fall, it's a beautiful metaphor. And maybe this is just me because I'm a sappy old man, but I do think it's trusting and it's built a great relationship with my daughter. So I do love rock climbing.

Ed Gaudet: I love the metaphor. I'm a poet, so I love the metaphor. I'm going to have to use that. I turned my daughters onto this.

Michael Jefferies: There's infinite wisdom in that.

Ed Gaudet: Infinite wisdom here. Exactly. Okay. So we'll segue into this next question. You're on a desert island. Top five records or movies. What would you pick?

Michael Jefferies: Okay. The first one I'm going to say is an album. I bring the Postal Service. And the reason of that is: when I met my wife, that was an album we had on repeat, and I can't listen to that without thinking back to those wonderful days when, we still have just a wonderful relationship. And every time that comes on, it strikes something special in me. So I'd probably bring Postal Service. A little more fun, maybe some Brother Ali, a little hip hop. I enjoy that as well. And then for movies, I'm going to cheat. I'm going to say a TV series, if that's okay. I'm going to bend the rules and say Arrested Development. I think that's one of the most clever and hilarious shows that I could watch over and over again and just keep laughing.

Ed Gaudet: That's good. That's a good one. All right.

Michael Jefferies: There's a TV on my desert island. Thank you for the TV.

Ed Gaudet: You get cable, too. Netflix, you get a Netflix. Free Netflix.

Michael Jefferies: Fantastic. Yeah.

Ed Gaudet: All right, last question. Any advice to folks that are just breaking into healthcare and want to pursue a path in IT or cybersecurity?
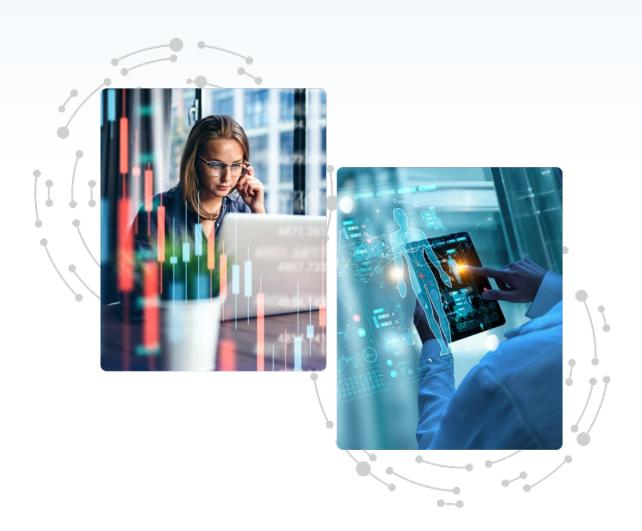
Michael Jefferies: Yeah, I think that sometimes we overestimate the importance of technical knowledge. And you can see a technical it doesn't necessarily just mean technology; knowledge of how healthcare works, knowledge of how IT systems work. How does a bill get paid in healthcare? You could have a PhD on that alone. That is important, but I'll just say that's the price of admission for a successful career in healthcare or technology information security. What I would convey is that the most important thing is not your technical knowledge.

Michael Jefferies (cont'd): As you get into leadership, you might be surprised that it's your ability to create a positive culture and your relationships with people, and how effectively you support people and have the great people around you. And that's the shift from leadership, from an individual contributor where your knowledge is most important. As you advance, it's going to be your ability to support and engage and really inspire people. That's most important. And to that end, don't be afraid to have fun at your own expense sometimes, but create that positive culture. That's the most important thing. It's not how smart you are. That's important as you're starting out, but it's about how well you can engage those teams and service of the mission.

Ed Gaudet: Excellent, excellent, excellent advice to listeners. Thank you, Mike, for your time today. This is Ed Gaudet from the Risk Never Sleeps Podcast. And if you're on the front lines protecting patient safety and delivering patient care, remember to stay vigilant because Risk Never Sleeps.

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