

PLOTTING THE MOVE TO EHR

By Brian Lichtlin

ELECTRONIC HEALTH RECORDS CAN SIMPLIFY YOUR PRACTICE, REDUCE COSTS, AND INCREASE YOUR STANDARD OF CARE. HERE'S HOW THEY'VE CHANGED LIFE FOR THREE PHYSICIANS.

Imagine a new way of running your practice. Using it, you would never have to worry about losing paperwork, reading cryptic handwriting, or providing records to back up the legitimacy of your coding practices. Better yet, imagine that this new way of running your practice was low cost, easy-to-use, and could actually help increase profits and allow you to spend more time with patients.

Is there any reason you wouldn't make the switch? Probably not. Electronic Health Records (EHR) provide precisely these benefits—and the number of physicians using EHR is rapidly growing, and gaining momentum.

Who's Made the Switch?

One EHR devotee is Dr. Susan Giovanni, a solo family physician in Wichita, Kansas, who employs a nurse, a receptionist, and a billing specialist. The two biggest motivations in making the switch for Dr. Giovanni were saving time and saving money. In her case, managing time was absolutely critical. "In the same year that we opened my practice, I had triplets, and my husband and I started a branch of our church which has since grown to 400 members."

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Programs that automate practice management (scheduling, billing, and communications) are linked seamlessly in a Web-based system to programs that manage patient records (individual histories, current medications, and visit discussions). "I don't have to print out daily schedules," she says, "and when I walk into a room, our software timestamps not only how long I spent with a patient, but when that patient arrived and how long they had to wait." All of her prescriptions are faxed using a wireless network, so they don't have to be handed through a chain of people or copied. And her software manages all incoming faxes of any sort.

All this saves Dr. Giovanni time because "we don't search for charts, we don't lose things, we don't mis-assign things, and we don't have to worry about keeping copies or reading handwriting." She can find virtually any document she's ever created in seconds.

And EHR technology saves Dr. Giovanni money because it eliminates costs ("I've never hired a transcriptionist once") and enables new revenue ("with better documentation, we're no longer afraid of audits, and so don't under code"). EHR has made a difference of "thousands, probably tens of thousands," of dollars a year.

Dr. Rogers Cain has been a family physician in Jacksonville, Florida for the last 21 years, and is the president of a local physician group currently evaluating EHR systems called *First Coast Primary Care*. In his own practice, Dr. Cain has been an early adopter. "Before President Bush outlined his plan in 2004 for everyone in the country to have an electronic health record within

10 years, I was already on board."

Dr. Cain opted for a Web-based system: "I'm in a hurricane zone, so having a web-based system makes me feel a lot safer," he explains. "If a catastrophe happens, hits my office, and destroys my backup, at least I'll know that the next morning, if nothing else, I'll be able to safely call up records." a

The great benefit for Dr. Cain has been increasing his standard of care. "Because I don't have to spend as much time managing paperwork, I can spend more time with my patients," he says. "And because I now code more confidently, I don't feel the pressure to rush through a patient visit in order to pay the rent."

Hector Castillo is a family physician in Los Angeles. He's partnered with two other physicians, and runs three clinics in the Los Angeles area: The Beverly Washington Medical Center, the Hana Clinic, and the Beverly Health and Birthing Center (his two partners are obgyns). Founded just four years ago, the clinics have grown explosively, the largest serving some 3,000 patients, and all of them growing at a rate of about 15 percent a year.

Castillo installed his web-based EHR system a bit less than two years ago, in September of 2005. "Our reimbursement rates have increased, and accounts receivable has decreased, because when insurers ask for notes and documentation, we can very easily locate them and send them."

Making a Decision

At a time when healthcare costs are rising and Medicare reimbursements are declining, family physicians are getting squeezed tighter than ever. It makes sense to take advantage of every edge you can get—and EHRs provide a definite edge. The benefits of waiting to take the plunge to simplify your practice with an EHR are diminishing quickly.

Cost? Depending on which EHR system you choose, costs today are minimal, and offset by the fewer expenses and greater revenue an EHR helps you realize.

Too many vendors? Yes, there are a number of players to choose from, but competition drives innovation, and web-based technologies offer great interoperability.

Tons of old records on paper? True, records that are "born digital" are slightly easier to manage (at first), and converting years of old records to a digital system can be a little bit of a headache—but only for about a month. After that, everything's downhill. So unless you're planning on retiring imminently, it makes sense to gain competitive advantage as soon as you can.

Difficulty? Again, with web-based technologies, if you can point and click, you shouldn't find it very difficult to master the new forms.

Once you do, you'll quickly realize what you've been missing, and start realizing genuine benefits in reduced expenses, increased peace of mind, and more time to focus on your patients.

Brian Lichtlin is CEO of MedAppz, a Wichita-based firm that creates electronic health record technology. He and his firm would be happy to answer questions about challenges and opportunities awaiting EHR users. Reach him as blichtlin@medappz.com.