

ELECTRONIC HEALTH RECORDS: HELPING HEALTHCARE PRACTITIONERS UNDERSTAND THE BENEFITS OF IMPLEMENTING A SYSTEM

A provision in the federal stimulus act is expected to transform the healthcare industry because of financial incentives for practices to improve the way medical records are stored. Here's how Electronic Health Records will help make your operations stronger and improve patient care.

By Ronald Sterling

Financial incentives offered under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) have motivated many physician practices and clinics to take a new look at Electronic Health Records (EHRs). As patients learn about the benefits of EHRs, and as your competitors and treatment partners move to more efficient — and effective — patient management and service tools, your practice will not want to be left behind.

EHR solutions offer many benefits:

HELPING YOUR PATIENTS

- Eliminate service barriers and improve collaboration among doctors and staff by providing instantaneous access to patient information
- Present a patient summary, which can include everything from medications and physical problems to outstanding orders
- Manage patient chart information, track orders and messages and monitor patients who are currently in your office
- Keep track of appropriate immunizations for pediatric patients

Managing accounts/claims and e-prescribing

- Decrease the amount of time that staff members spend dealing with administrative, billing and scheduling tasks
- Improve administration of medication, because transcription errors are lessened

Many EHR solutions include charting tools so doctors can review information about patients during appointments. Forms and entry screens allow a doctor to chart a visit for a specific problem or injury as well as record follow-up testing and prescriptions needed to serve a patient.

To implement an EHR solution, the medical office needs to be linked through a computer network with reliable high-speed Internet access so records can be accessed and shared. Technology plays a key role in maintaining these systems and keeping them operating properly so data is accessible at all times. Because sensitive information is being stored, security and backup systems are necessary in case the primary data source is attacked by unauthorized personnel or is knocked offline.

GAIN BACK VALUABLE TIME

Paper records steal time from physicians and staff when they have to search for information to address a patient condition. Indeed, many physicians have to look through a chart several times during a single patient visit. EHR solutions eliminate this by providing real-time access to the same information through multiple routes.

Many EHR solutions let you view diagnoses in a list for the patient and within specific chart notes as well as to call up historic notes relevant to a specific problem. EHR solutions also can highlight the important aspects of a patient situation. For example, abnormal lab results from a patient can be viewed in a flowsheet with previous results. Similarly, EHR solutions don't require patient chart preparation and other paper filing efforts that consume time but provide few benefits. With an EHR solution, communication with the pharmacy about prescriptions is done through the computer, so fewer callbacks occur.

EHR solutions may also allow you to assign patients to a particular category, such as patients over age 50 who have not had a colonoscopy. More specifically, you may be able to identify those patients with a history of a certain illness in their family or use a specific drug so staff can be alerted to watch for adverse reactions. In time, this robust repository of data may allow physicians to do more complex analysis using predictive modeling about a patient's health, diseases, possible treatments, billing behavior and more.

INCENTIVES AND PENALTIES

By implementing an EHR solution, your practice may be eligible for financial benefits. ARRA includes \$19 billion to encourage the healthcare industry to adopt EHR solutions, and physicians may receive up to \$44,000 each for implementation and "meaningful use" of a qualified EHR solution¹. Payments can start as early as 2011, but you must implement the system by 2012 to receive the full benefit. Smaller financial amounts are available for practices that attain meaningful use in 2013 and 2014. (See chart for details.)

Practices that choose not to implement an EHR solution can expect to see their Medicare benefits reduced². Starting in 2015 until 2017, practices that have not fully adopted an EHR solution are expected to see a 1% reduction — for a total of 3% — in Medicare reimbursements. The Secretary of Health and Human Services has the authority to make exceptions to this reduction on a case-by-case basis for physicians who demonstrate significant hardship.

¹ Department of Health and Human Services fact sheet: <http://bit.ly/15Lya7>

² Ibid

The ARRA incentive will certainly increase the number of physicians who are fully using a full-featured EHR solution from the current 4% of practices as well as incentivize the 17% of practices that use a less-than-full-featured EHR, according to the Department of Health and Human Services³. The Congressional Budget Office predicts that 90% of physicians and 70% of hospitals will start using EHR systems over the next few years⁴.

Even if you are not interested in the ARRA incentives or concerned about the penalties, you cannot avoid what effect EHR solutions will have on healthcare: Patients are keenly interested in interacting with their doctors through the Internet, and practices that have EHRs are commonly viewed as providing better service to patients. Indeed, practices that effectively use them have lower personnel costs than ones that continue to rely on paper records.

Some insurer pay-for-performance programs provide additional incentives to practices that use EHRs. Other programs include requirements that are only practical with an EHR. For example, reporting for some Physician Quality Reporting Initiative (PQRI) measures includes a look-back period that would be difficult to ascertain on a paper record.

IMPLEMENTING AN EHR SYSTEM

EHR implementation can consume a substantial amount of resources and time. Eliminating the paper chart, which contains years of patient information, is a complex process. Moving practices from paper-oriented processes to a workflow strategy that capitalizes on the inherent capabilities of an EHR has proven difficult for many doctors.

Although specific EHR features will depend on which vendor you choose, general components include: patient information, appointment scheduler, authorization alert, HIPAA compliance, clinical charting, medical billing, document manager, prescription writer, progress notes and lab order tracking.

In order to effectively implement an EHR system, you need to establish a results-oriented project plan that addresses the key elements for success:

- **Manage the project:** To establish the basis for the project, EHR implementation must be empowered as a strategic decision of the practice. Besides having a fully networked computer system and other technological upgrades, such an undertaking requires changes to processes, management, staff roles and physician activities that will require management support and approval.
- **Select a system:** With more than 400 EHR products on the market, many practices have dozens to choose from. The selection process should include a subjective analysis of EHR options in light of the actual needs of the practice and not simply highlights of the product.
- **Implement the EHR:** Name a project team that consists of full-time or part-time staff or a consultant who is assigned to implement the solution and who will monitor the people, process and technology. The team will install the hardware, software and network; customize the system by adding additional forms or templates; integrate the system with the practice's existing systems, such as billing or

³ HHS report *The Underserved and Health Information Technology: Issues and Opportunities*: <http://bit.ly/QxnAs>

⁴ Congressional Budget Office analysis: <http://bit.ly/cus0>

scheduling; transfer data from paper documents or the existing electronic system into the new one; test and maintain the new environment; and train other staff members on how to use it.

- **Ensure a reliable network:** A practice will need to build a more robust and reliable underlying network infrastructure and follow best-practice strategies made possible by the EHR solution. This includes making sure your network has the necessary bandwidth so employees can retrieve information quickly and efficiently; up-to-date computers; and remote, secure connectivity for employees at branch offices or if an authorized staff member needs to access the system from home. Once a network is in place, you will be able to maintain cost-effective communications with your branches, mobile employees and physicians quickly and easily.
- **Support the team:** Unlike a practice management system, an EHR is a mission-critical service to the operation of the entire practice. A support structure is needed to provide frontline support to deal with the inevitable problems as well as plan to address evolving issues and needs. With a high-speed, reliable healthcare solution, you can operate multiple network locations that need a private Intranet network along with a method to connect to the public Internet.

The risk of failing to implement an EHR solution is sobering. Failure could undermine your practice and strategically damage your organization. In addition, partial implementations and impractical workarounds can increase the cost of operations and complicate patient service.

TIMING

For many practices, the key challenge is the time needed to achieve meaningful use. Consider the following timeline to select an EHR system and have it fully implemented:

- **Selection:** It is not uncommon to take six months or more to select an EHR product.
- **Implementation:** Implementing a replacement practice management system to work with the EHR can stretch out four to six more months, and implementing an EHR can easily take six to eight months or longer.

Transition: Once your practice starts using the EHR, it can take another eight to 12 months to fully utilize the system and move active patients into the EHR environment.

CONCLUSION

Between ARRA's incentives and the general frustration with the inefficiencies of the paper record, many practices will move to adopt EHRs to improve patient service and efficiency. However, the move is a complex process that requires adequate planning, commitment and resources to ensure that your practice benefits from the effort and achieves your goals. With the deadlines set forth by the government's financial incentives, you can see why planning should begin sooner rather than later.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ronald Sterling is president of Sterling Solutions Ltd., a consultancy that helps physician practices select and implement EHRs. He has written four books on practice-based computer systems, including *Keys to EMR Success*, which won the Health Information Management and Systems Society Book of the Year Award. Sterling has worked with practices and clinics in more than 30 states and has reviewed electronic health record and practice management systems from more than 150 vendors.

Chart: Annual Payment Under ARRA

Year of Eligibility	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total
2011	\$18,000	\$12,000	\$8,000	\$4,000	\$2,000	---	\$44,000
2012	---	\$18,000	\$12,000	\$8,000	\$4,000	\$2,000	\$44,000
2013	---	---	\$15,000	\$12,000	\$8,000	\$4,000	\$39,000
2014	---	---	---	\$12,000	\$8,000	\$4,000	\$24,000
2015	---	---	---	---	---	---	

Source: American Medical Association

EHRs WILL TRANSFORM THE WORKFLOW IN A DOCTOR'S OFFICE

Electronic Health Records will affect every individual who has contact with a medical practice, from the patient to the doctor to the billing person. Dramatic changes to a practice's operations, as well as how you work with patients, will be triggered by enhancing access to and connection with your patient's medical record. Many practices will want to make sure they have a robust and reliable underlying network infrastructure to take full advantage of the many benefits of an EHR solution.

If you look at any patient service activity, the key barrier to responding and tracking an issue is the initial access to the patient's chart followed by thrashing through chart pages to find the needed information. For many practices, patient triage requires taking a message and subsequently retrieving the patient's paper chart. The chart and message is then passed among doctors and staff to record the clinical recommendation and get back in touch with the patient. For most practices, this process is time-consuming, expensive and untraceable.

With an EHR, as soon as the patient calls, the clinical staff can immediately access the file to record the problem or answer a question. Patient notifications and reminders can be automated. Issues that can't be answered by the clinical person can be forwarded and tracked in the EHR to the doctor. This way, the practice makes more effective use of staff, and many issues can be addressed right when the patient calls.

CHANGING RESPONSIBILITIES

To fully capitalize on instant access to relevant patient information will require a complete makeover for many practices. Staff responsibilities and required skill sets will change, and administrators will need to rethink practice workflow and velocity.

For example, instant access to the record of a patient who just underwent surgery would empower many staff members to monitor and follow up on scheduling issues, rather than routing callers to the one person who has the surgery scheduling paper.

RESOURCES

More information is available at these sites:

AMERICAN RECOVERY AND REINVESTMENT ACT OF 2009 (ARRA)

- <http://www.recovery.gov>: Information on the federal government's economic recovery program
- <http://bit.ly/xhg5m>: IRS ARRA Information Center

MEANINGFUL USE DEFINITIONS

- <http://bit.ly/1f6Ri0>: Recommendation from the Meaningful Use Workgroup
- <http://www.meaningfuluse.org>: Discussion forum from the Association of Medical Directors of Information Systems

HIPAA SECURITY REGULATIONS

- <http://bit.ly/nzi8J>: HHS security standard overview
- <http://bit.ly/ZILrE>: Detailed overview of the HIPAA security rule

QWEST SOLUTIONS

- <http://www.qwest.com/business/solutions/healthcare.html>: Help increase bandwidth, streamline resource time, reduce costs and keep your data secure
- <http://bit.ly/4hwNK>: Qwest Metro Optical Ethernet
- <http://bit.ly/AeEpl>: Qwest iQ® Networking
- <http://bit.ly/m6Gq5>: Qwest iQ® Integrated Access

QWEST HELPS HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS MEET KEY TECH CHALLENGES

More healthcare providers and administrators are turning to technology to automate routine tasks and reduce patient wait times. Many are also deploying an Electronic Health Record (EHR) infrastructure that helps ensure both compliance with regulations as well as fast and secure access to patient information.

Through providing for our thousands of healthcare customers, Qwest understands how healthcare IT must leverage communications like never before to simultaneously benefit patients and manage fiscal responsibility. Here are five critical areas in which we can help you and your staff run your practice more efficiently:

Collaboration — Improve ability for clinicians to work together

- Use real-time images
- Scan images at the click of a mouse
- Watch videos
- Tap into telemedicine

Productivity — Lessen the daily fires dealing with patients to allow for longer range planning

- Call routing
- Appointment reminders
- Voice to e-mail
- Fax to e-mail

Network performance and administration — Improve performance and access to applications running on the network

- Consolidate communication services and vendors
- Reduce trouble tickets
- Easily add new sites to the network
- Centralize support and control while decentralizing access

Security — Be at ease when accessing your data from any location, whether at a patient's home or at your office

- In partnership with IBM
- Private networks

Customer support — Provide dedicated account teams, service support and best-in-class migration and project management help

- Share our experience from working with many healthcare customers
- Benchmark architectures and communication platforms
- Advise on issues that other providers are seeing, what they purchased to resolve and results they received