



Going electronic

Electronic medical records add up to big time—and money—savings

When it comes to electronic medical records (EMR), the bottom line for Dr. Richard Wiginton is one of his top priorities. And he isn't talking about his balance sheet or clinic's revenue.

"The bottom line," he says of xwave, the EMR system he uses, "is it improves the quality of care a patient receives."

"It significantly improves recordkeeping, accuracy of recordkeeping and allows real-time review of notes on the screen in front of you. It stays accurate with the College or Ministry of Health's recordkeeping [regulations] with no alterations after completion and time and date stamping."

It also increases the speed of retrieving information. EMR is ideally suited for sharing patient information between different providers. There are no charts to shuffle around, damage or possibly lost portions, he says.

"They can access whatever level is appropriate for them. It has a full tracking mechanism. It facilitates collaborative care," he says.

Wiginton has been using computers in his practice since 1989 when he started electronic billing. By 2004, EMR was a part of his daily operating procedures. For the family physician from Brighton, ON, EMR makes a lot of sense. His practice covers two sites, has three physicians and provides care for more than 6,500 patients.

"We've become more efficient," he says. "There's a timely schedule for patients, good quality, legible medical records. At the end of the day it improves patient care and allows me more flexibility. I'm not stuck at the office catching up."

That's because Wiginton can log in to his EMR service from anywhere there's an Internet connection. That means from the comfort of his own home, at the hospital or at a long-term care facility, where he can access information on all his patients, including one he hadn't planned on seeing—and didn't have the chart for.

Wiginton is also a fan of the significant functionality around screening and preventative care for patients. The Ontario Ministry of Health has five preventative care programs it focuses on and compensates

physicians for, and his EMR system generates patient lists for those who meet inclusion criteria for screening.

Dennis Niebergal, president and CEO of Clinicare, a leading provider of clinical management systems and an EMR vendor, has had an interest in the paperless physician's office since he first automated a clinic to go paperless in 1984. But it isn't about not having a paper chart, per se, that holds the appeal for the physician. It's about the relevance and accessibility of information.

"It's all about having information organized and readable and structured in a format that displays or prints pertinent information for the reason for the visit," said Niebergal. "Whether it's an annual check-up or flu shot or follow-up, the information is presented for the reason for the visit. It focuses on workflow improvement."

EMR started, he says, as a tool to enhance the quality of care delivered. Physicians were already providing good care; this tool made it easier and could save the physician a half- to one hour each day, and save up to 20% of staff's time. It is these time savings that lead to cost savings that enhance the overall quality of healthcare, he said.

Niebergal said there is a learning curve and some clinics encounter challenges moving from a paper office to a paperless one, mainly because the workflow and other interactions change. Clinics with good management and governance structures will find the metamorphosis the easiest.

"Doctors think you can turn it on and drive it," he says of EMR systems. "It takes some change management training and learning new things. It takes an investment on their part."

Wiginton agrees that there are some challenges. He says the cost is often an issue, although the Ontario Ministry of Health offered some limited financial incentives. Canada, he adds, has been slow to take

BELOW Dr. Lewis O'Brien, Lead Physician at Group Health Centre in Sault Ste. Marie, ON, demonstrates GHC's CLINICARE EMR solution to (clockwise) Federal Minister of Health Tony Clement, Marc Kealey, CEO, Ontario Pharmacists' Association and Richard Alvarez, President & CEO, Canada Health Infoway.



You have a choice of EMR vendors across Canada. And there's a tool to find the best system one for you. CanadianEMR is a free independent online resource for registered MDs operated by Dr. Alan Brookstone (a family physician in BC) that went live in May (canadianemr.ca). Check out and compare over 20 different EMR systems. Following is a sample list of six:

- CLINICARE CORP.
- EMIS INC.
- INTRAHEALTH CANADA LTD.
- MED ACCESS INC.
- OSLER SYSTEMS MANAGEMENT
- WOLF MEDICAL SYSTEMS

Health Canada wants half of all Canadian medical records to be electronic by 2009. As a result various provincial bodies have been created to assist physicians. For example, OntarioMD.ca is run by the OMA and paid for by the Ministry of Health. It provides free access to products, services, support, and a list of approved EMR products. Similarly, the Physician Information Technology Office (PITO) is a joint effort between BC's provincial government and the BCMA (pito.bc.ca). See what your own provincial medical association may offer.

advantage of the opportunities EMR can provide, and the time to get onboard the EMR train is now.

Wiginton also mentions the steep, sometimes painful learning curve. Staff won't be more productive until they become adept at using EMR. And doctors also have to get up to speed and have realistic expectations. EMR is a tool, not a magic wand.

"If they think it will magically do things for them, that won't happen," Wiginton says. "It won't see patients for you without you being there." ●

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