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FEATURES

Achieving Specialty-Based EMR Implementation

By Joe Rubinsztain, MD

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The current health care fiscal formula just isn't working. Practices are facing higher operating costs with stagnant or reduced reimbursements. Electronic medical records (EMRs) provide a solution to assist in controlling costs as well as offering a way to help doctors and nurses return to practicing medicine instead of becoming transcriptionists or administrators.

Unfortunately, many EMRs fail to capture the promised value because practices and vendors underestimate the implementation effort, users resist change and products perform poorly when first compared to paper charts. An effectively designed, specialty-based EMR helps shorten the transition learning curve (from paper to electronic) and provides the best platform for medical personnel.

Without a specialty-based EMR solution, users rarely increase efficiency and decrease costs. Instead, they are forced to format the solution for their specialty without the technical expertise.

Consider the case of a typical cardiology practice looking to decrease costs and provide better patient care using EMRs. The practice will need to eliminate transcriptions, implement an Internet patient portal and replace the paper chart with a more efficient electronic version. However, this is not easy to achieve with a generic EMR system because:

- Tools to document critical procedures such as EKGs, stress tests and echocardiography are not included [in the generic system]
- The practice will only eliminate a fraction of the transcription costs without specialized procedures included in the program
- Electronic solutions require extensive training and are initially perceived to be slow when compared to traditional dictation
- The practice needs to form a committee, that also includes physicians, to customize the "bare-bones" system with specialty-specific content, such as order lists and patient intake questionnaires

A cardiology practice is more likely to use an EMR if the solution makes their jobs easier and provides a return on investment in a variety of ways.

Minimal Effort to Implement

Seamless implementation requires experienced vendors, organized practices and proven systems. Specialty practices should only consider vendors who have successfully automated similar medical groups. A cardiology vendor must research all possible connections to existing diagnostic devices (EKGs, treadmills, echo, etc.) to streamline documentation.

Similarly, a gastroenterology vendor must plan for endoscopy training and pathology sample processing, all critical for comprehensive diagnostics and treatment. Once the implementation plan is created the practice should not spend too much time building or eliminating extensive lists with common specialty information. The specialized system should provide a good starter-set to shortcut the standardization process. Additionally, it should ultimately enable specialists to benchmark against specialized best practices to optimize patient outcomes, increase revenues and satisfy payer requirements.

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Easier Than Paper

To become easier than paper, the EMR must offer access to better information with less effort and minimal training. In other words, users should expect fewer mouse clicks, intelligent and flexible forms capable of reusing information and the look and feel of familiar paper forms to reduce the learning curve that most users will incur. The majority of EMRs accept information from different sources like point-and-click fields, voice or handwriting recognition, and soon, digital pen systems. Specialized vendors can also accept information from specialty laboratories (pathology and esoteric) and diagnostic devices like CT scanners, Endoscopes and EKGs.

Addresses All Practices' Activities

The patient lifecycle is different for each specialty, but all practices share basic functions like registration, evaluation and management, procedures, billing, workflow and communications, for example. The ideal EMR solution should easily integrate all specialty activities in a single platform that reuses information without unreliable interfaces and multiple-vendor support issues. In a fully automated practice, a patient's records should be linked from making an appointment, undergoing evaluation and procedure, and follow-up.

Internet portals allow patients to efficiently set-up appointments and review their history. Records are then linked so medical personnel may review them prior to each patient's appointment. By doing so, the patient can quickly be verified and undergo evaluation. Results can easily be passed electronically to different facilities so patients can undergo the appropriate scheduled procedures.

By tying all elements together, patients are efficiently processed, medical personnel have adequate time to review records and diagnoses and applicable billing codes can be calculated for prompt payment. More importantly, issues eliminate themselves because records, results and reporting are tied together for workers and patients to access and review.

Specialty-based EMRs integrate the entire scheduling, evaluation and procedure, and feedback process. This makes EMRs easier to use, provide more value, cost less to implement and have lower adoption issues and medical risks than generic alternatives.

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