

Benefits of EMR outweigh the cost and learning curve

by Adam Alpers, DO

It's hard to teach an old dog new tricks, but we can try.

To write or to type, that is the question. To boldly go (according to the latest statistics) where only a small few are going; that is the challenge. Actually, for everyone in the medical profession, the reality of the paper chart is slowly coming to a close.

The digital age is moving forward at lightning speed.

But can you teach an old dog to jump through hoops of fire?

Believe it or not, there is a long line of medical providers that prefer a paper chart to a digital one. I happen to be one of them. Nonetheless, I realized that the transition to the digital world is going to happen no matter how I feel about it. If I could have it my way, I'd like to be "grandfathered" into a provision exempting me from having to implement EMR or EHR. This way I can slowly fade into the dust without having to undergo the learning curve and the cost that comes with this new move to electronic medical records.

Fortunately, I am someone who is capable of transitioning into this new digital age of healthcare, and I am begrudgingly making the shift to the electronic world. So, for the old dogs struggling with the new tricks of the trade, I've discovered an evaluation process that is making the switch a little less abrupt.

Making a mental adjustment

The first suggestion I implore you take to heart is to change the way you view digital records. The way that I have done this is by weighing the pros and cons of using them. Doing this has mentally prepared me to embrace the changes as they come.

So let's start with a comparison between paper charts and digital records.

Paper-based records require a significant amount of storage space compared to digital records. Not only do they take up a significant amount of space, but because we have to save the physical record for at least seven years they seem to pile up on each other exponentially.

In direct contrast, electronic media doesn't require much physical space at all. And, typically electronic media costs less to store. This means that the room that you are currently using to store all your paper charts could be converted into a treatment room or other usable space that generates revenue.

Mental Note: EMR can help me save room, treat more patients, and generate revenue. EMR is good.

How many times have you heard the statement “You write just like a doctor!” Personally, I find that to be a good thing, since I am one, but we all know the legibility issues our staff deals with day in and day out.

What we don’t always recognize is that issues with legible records and prescriptions contribute to medical errors, which can launch a domino effect of problems. EMR takes the legibility issue out of the mix.

EMR allows you to create a progress note without any mistake as to what you’ve written. You can also make more comprehensive progress notes with EMR which will help improve your medical coding and billing process. Closely documented progress notes equals better payer reimbursements, which means you actually get paid for the work you do!

Mental Note: EMR helps me document my patient’s needs better and can reduce the likelihood of paper chart related medical errors. EMR can help me be a better physician.

One feature of EMR that I find very beneficial to the profession is the ability to gather information and track trends like never before. Tracking trends on paper is practically impossible unless you are manually tracking the information to get trends as simple as the last six or seven HgbA1C for comparison.

With the EMR, in only a few clicks of a button, you can access all the information you need because it’s right at your fingertips. The ability of the system to track and trend data is one of the best ways to help you see real time data that will enable you to implement changes to your practice by identifying trends quickly and as often as you like.

Mental Note: EMR will help me stay better informed on ways to treat my patients and manage their long-term health. Maybe EMR isn’t so bad after all?

With a milkbone or two an old dog can do just fine

The latest data estimates that between 17% – 20% of providers have implemented a basic EMR system. The average EMR system is projected to cost between \$40,000- \$50,000 to get started, and the price goes up from there if you want to have all the necessary equipment.

Unfortunately, there is no way around the cost and time involved in implementing electronic medical record keeping. There is going to be a learning curve, and you may actually see a decline in revenues while implementation of a system takes place. So be prepared to manage reduced revenue for at least three months while you are still paying your ongoing bills and purchasing equipment along the way.

So it seems, EMR is here to stay and the best thing you can do is discover the most affordable and most time efficient manner of getting things running. It may be hard to see at first, but if you focus on the benefits that outweighing the cost and learning curve, you too can learn the new tricks of the trade with relative ease.

Adam Alpers is a primary care physician and blogs at [Medical Billing & Coding for Physicians](#).