



[new futures]

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Medical records go digital

Imagine you're visiting your physician for your annual physical. Instead of the nurse picking up your file, she grabs a laptop computer and escorts you to the examining room. She takes your temperature, blood pressure and so on, making jabs at the computer screen with a special stylus on drop-down menus.

Then the doctor comes in and picks up the laptop. Using the stylus, he flips through page after page of your file that is now in "digital" or "electronic" format, sees your reason for being in his office and begins to ask you questions. As you respond, he makes notes to your "electronic file" and prescribes an antibiotic for that cold you caught last month.

Your file, which is contained in a system known as "electronic medical records" or "electronic health records" alerts him that you are allergic to that antibiotic and a drop down menu suggests alternative medications that will not conflict with other medications you are taking. He asks which pharmacy you would like to pick up your prescription at and if it happens to be in his database, your prescription will be ready for you by the time you get there.

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For the patient, the system has made for a safer visit. Aside from the above advantages, the chances of his file being misplaced, papers being misfiled, or accessibility by inappropriate eyes have been minimized.

This system, fully integrated with the physician's "practice management" and "billing and coding" system, has prepared your bill with the appropriate codes for each chargeable function performed and is prepared to upload the billing information to the appropriate organization (insurance company, Medicare, Medicaid, etc.) electronically.

In other words, the bill has been prepared at a much lower cost, quicker and more efficiently than currently performed by hand. This in time will lower the cost of health care for us all while increasing profit margins for small practices.

So when does this perfect future begin? It's here now. A few physicians and hospitals are already there while a larger number are in some stage of adapting a system. The vast majority know they need to go to an EMR system but haven't done so, yet.

Why must the medical community adopt EMR systems? It lowers their costs of operation. It helps reduce

costly mistakes (both in human life and dollars). It has been mandated

First, by automating redundant processes (something computers do well), staff that could be providing valuable care are relieved of "filing" and allowed to carry on the more important duties.

Second, it is estimated that up to 98,000 Americans die each year due to medical errors, according to a study that led to a ground-breaking book written in 2000 by the Institute of Medicine called *To Err is Human*. The book asserts that "the problem is not bad people in health care--it is that good people are working in bad systems that need to be made safer." Both the health care industry and government have vigorously responded to this situation to reduce and eliminate errors as much as possible.

Third, in 2006 President Bush mandated that by 2014 all Americans will have access to their medical records via the web. The Certification Commission for Healthcare Information Technology (CCHIT), a private nonprofit group, was developed in 2005 to establish standards and certify vendors who meet them.

SLOW TO ADAPT

It has been recently estimated that only 20% of all medical organizations are in some stage of conversion. Less than half (8%) are estimated to be in the final stage of conversion. Most of these are hospitals. First, the purchase price of approved systems can range from \$12,000 per physician to \$100,000 and up. Training of personnel, technical support and impact on current operations can impact a small practice, which is why most older, small practices have not begun the process.

Second, as with anything new, it is difficult and time consuming to separate the wheat from the chaff. Many software providers and value added resellers make promises that cannot be delivered. As with any purchase, it is important to buy product and service from people you know and trust. Check out their reputation locally and call references.

Third, there are dozens of good workshops available through associations such as Healthcare Financial Management Association (HFMA), Indiana Health Information Management Association (IHIMA) and Indiana Medical Group Management Association (IMGMA). Plus the government's HHS website is a plethora of information on the subject. Don't let fear of the unknown drive any decision.

It's coming. Electronic Medical Records will not be perfect, but it will help make health care better, more reliable and lower costs. And that is a welcome change to both patients and providers alike.