

Sailing Towards EMR – Treasure Island or Iceberg?

The United States is moving steadily towards electronic medical records (EMR). The HITECH Stimulus Act is like a hurricane-force wind, driving practices toward the electronic age. Many doctors have conflicting opinions about EMRs. Are they a treasure island, full of benefits like increased productivity and revenue, or is it a dangerous iceberg that could sink your practice?

I have been using an EMR in my practice since 2003. I have had a fantastic voyage along the way, and I would like to share my experiences with you. Follow me, and I will show you how to chart a course to the EMR treasure island and avoid the EMR iceberg. There are three things I would like to discuss with you: getting “buy-in” from your practice, reasons to adopt an EMR, and results you can expect from a well-implemented system. If you follow my advice, you can successfully implement an EMR in time to participate in the HITECH Stimulus Act. Don’t miss the boat!

Convincing your practice to adopt an EMR can be a difficult task. Moving ahead without getting buy-in from your staff could lead to mutiny, or worse, a failed implementation. I would like to address several of the most common concerns. First, many doctors think EMRs are too expensive. Prices range from free to more than \$100,000. You get what you pay for, this is true, but most doctors do not need a hugely expensive system. Find a system that meets your requirements without a lot of unnecessary features. Second, doctors may be afraid of purchasing a complex and difficult system. This is understandable; no one wants to look computer-illiterate in front of their patients. Furthermore, many complex Certification Commission for Health Information Technology (CCHIT) certified EMR systems have a three to six month installation backlog. My EMR was inexpensive, easy to install, and simple to learn. My staff and I are not computer geniuses. Our EMR is based on Microsoft Office, so we could learn it quickly. Third, doctors do not want to make a poor decision, or purchase an EMR the government disqualifies from the stimulus act. Since it is based on Microsoft Office, my EMR is also easy to change. It can grow and adapt along with my practice, and I have no worries that my system may or may not comply with the undefined HITECH stimulus requirements of the future.

There are many reasons to adopt an EMR system, apart from the HITECH act. Knowing these reasons will help you get your office on-board and allow you to make an informed purchase decision. First and most importantly, an EMR can improve your quality of care. A good system should be more

thorough than your paper charts. It will allow you to track vital signs, weight, and lab results graphically, so you can tell how your patients are doing at a glance. Second, improved history notes and other documentation can help you pass an audit, as well as communicate more effectively with other caregivers, and reduce the risk of malpractice litigation. Third, it is critical to your patients that you track which medications they are on now and have been on in the past. Fourth, an EMR system can improve your finances. Better documentation will confirm that you frequently qualify for higher reimbursement levels. This works because your paper forms don’t capture much of the work you have performed. EMRs also eliminate the labor and expense of managing paper, such as hours spent filing, scanning, faxing, and searching for lost paper charts, in addition to paper, ink and toner expenses.

A well-implemented EMR system is a virtual treasure island; it will provide enormous benefits to your practice. As I already mentioned, an EMR system can improve your finances. My system DID allow me to code at a higher level, because so much of my work went undocumented under the old paper system. In addition, my office ran more efficiently. My expenses went down dramatically, and as my staff members left over the years, I did not need to replace them. I began with six staff members, and currently I operate with only two. Since my practice is more efficient, I can leave the office on time every day. My wife is happier now because I have more time to spend with the family. I am constantly amazed at the flexibility of my system. My system is constantly adapting to my needs. I was able to include things like lab interfaces, x-rays, electronic faxing, e-prescribing and many other features that makes my life easier. My EMR can do billing and automated book keeping through an interface to QuickBooks. Automating the books has saved me a lot of time tracking my finances and on my taxes and more than a few headaches!

The key to finding the EMR treasure island and avoiding the EMR iceberg is to go with a simple and adaptable system. Shop around with many different vendors and demand in-depth demonstrations. Keep in mind my reasons to buy an EMR and the benefits you should expect. Ask every vendor about these key points! Please also take a look at www.XLEMR.com; they did a great job building my EMR. XLEMR has ready-to-install systems for many different specialties. If you have any questions, please feel free to give me a call. You can reach me on my cell at 770.846.2627. I look forward to hearing from you.

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