

Case Study

Pediatricians Say Paperless Office Creates a Multitude of Benefits Local EHR company, RANAC, states Trend is Growing

When pediatricians Eve Gill, MD, and Donald McIntire, MD, decided to open a practice inside a new suburban Indianapolis hospital, they knew they wanted to create a virtually paperless office using Electronic Health Records (EHR). "This is where healthcare is going," said Dr. McIntire, citing the trend of hospitals, specialty groups and others making the move to EHR. "It's phenomenal."

Their practice, Pediatric Associates of Avon, now has EHR and electronic billing software. The physicians are encouraging others to make the move.

Dr. McIntire predicts EHR will decrease medical errors, improve access to information and will make storing information better and more secure. Dr. Gill agrees that it's the next step in medicine. After talking with four EHR vendors, they chose Indianapolis-based RANAC to install their EHR and billing system and to train the staff. "Having someone who was local and who could provide ongoing service was important to us," the doctors explained.

President Bush has called for the move from paper medical records to electronic records. Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich is leading the charge to create a universal electronic medical record for every American by 2014. Politicians are interested in the potential to improve patient safety and minimize medical errors.

Safety First

EHR has many built-in efficiencies, but the primary reason many are so enthusiastic is because of patient safety issues. Anyone who has looked at his or her own medical chart knows that handwritten records can be difficult to discern. Instructions and prescriptions written by hand have more potential for misunderstanding. EHR systems also have programmed safety measures.

Dr. Gill explains that when she now examines a patient, she does so using a tablet PC in the exam room. With customized templates created just for her needs (Dr. McIntire has his own separate templates), she asks questions and checks to be sure age-appropriate tests and immunizations are complete. "It minimizes chances of forgetting something," states Dr. Gill.

When writing prescriptions, the system will issue a warning if there are any drug allergies or to remind the doctor of long-term medications the patient is taking. Also alerts can be set as a reminder to follow-up on tests that could have been overlooked. Protocols can be set

up to remind physicians about regular health screenings or medical concerns.

Lab tests, notes from specialists and other additions are easily added to a patient's chart. In an emergency, having a complete medical record available in seconds is crucial. With an electronic system, the doctor can access the information at the hospital, office or even at home when he or she is on call or is conferring with another physician.

Efficiency, Service & Savings

Drs. Gill and McIntire were motivated to get past the inefficiencies of the traditional paper system. For instance, in their previous practices, only one person could use the medical chart at a time. It could get lost or misfiled, and someone had to be paid to pull and file every chart every day. With EHR, the records are secure but accessible to multiple individuals, such as the doctor, nurse, scheduler and billing person.

Traditionally, if a patient called with a question, the nurse would have to hang up, pull the chart, look up the information and call the patient back, explained Dr. Gill. Now, they simply pull up the information on the computer while they are on the phone. The same is true in the exam room, when the nurse or doctor can pull up information, or even suggest online health education tools. Patient instructions can be easily printed. (Yes, there is still some paper in the office.) The computer is also used to show growth charts and other visuals, which the parents love, according to Dr. Gill.

If the patient calls to request a prescription refill, a nurse will enter the request to the physician and approval occurs in moments. It's much more patient service-oriented, states Dr. Gill. If multiple prescriptions are needed, they can be printed or sent on one page, which is easier to handle than multiple sheets. Even the child's nickname can be entered into the system and will pop up to remind the physician to call him or her by the preferred name.

Notes that previously were dictated by the physician are now entered into the computer at the point of care. This has also provided efficiencies and cost savings.

Normally, the doctors would have to file and store thousands of charts. There was significant cost savings when those records were stored electronically. "We would have to pay \$20 a square foot to store each record until the (pediatric) patient is 28 years old,"

explains Dr. McIntire, adding that they definitely would have required a larger office space to store all the paper files. In addition, they don't need file cabinets, file folders, extra paper, and more. "We even use intraoffice electronic memos instead of the old sticky notes," states Dr. Gill. EHR also provides savings from reduced mailing, faxing and courier services.

Furthermore, according to Dr. McIntire, staffing needs for their practice were greatly reduced with EHR. "In our previous practice, we had 16 staff members, whereas now we only have six," he said.

Security & Access

With HIPAA concerns, physicians need to ensure the security of all medical information. Using EHR, only specific individuals are approved to access data. They must enter passwords to enter the system. In addition, the record will show who accessed what information at what time. "This prevents any possibility that a member of the office staff could read a chart out of curiosity," states Dr. McIntire.

Despite added security, patients and appropriate individuals have increased access to medical information. For instance, test results can be quickly sent to and from a specialist's office. An immunization record can be instantly faxed to a child's school. A prescription can be sent electronically to the pharmacy of choice so it will be waiting when the parent stops by.

Of course, traditional paper storage methods are not secure from fires and floods. "There are practitioners out there with basements filled with charts," states Dr. McIntire. Records that use to get destroyed after the required time period are now archived, he adds.

Billing Benefits

The EHR system communicates with the billing system. This has significantly reduced the time required for the physicians to be paid by insurance companies. Dr. McIntire stated that their accounts receivable collection period has improved by more than 20 days.

Billing statements are completed as part of the note during the patient visit, he explains. The billing information is exported to the billing person and is filed electronically. "It's more efficient, faster and allows (the billing person) to catch any errors in documentation before it is sent," he added.

Getting Up to Speed

There is a learning curve to have the staff and physicians trained with a new system. However, Drs. Gill and McIntire say the time spent and the financial cost were well worth it. Dr. Gill calculates that in less than two years, the practice will have saved more than it spent on

the entire system. And almost half of that cost would have been required to purchase a billing system anyway, she adds.

"My advice is to take the plunge," emphasizes Dr. McIntire with regard to changing to EHR. He has heard many physicians say they don't think EHR would work well for them because of their unique needs. "But everything is customized. You already use a form; this one is just going into a computer instead of being dictated," Dr. McIntire states.

He adds that he was not very computer savvy when they made the decision to go paperless. "The learning curve is there. You have to put effort in on the front end. You design your own templates. Nursing templates are created for phone calls. We are still tweaking to become even more efficient".

"We both feel very comfortable (with the system) even though we didn't have a lot of computer knowledge at the beginning. You don't have to be a techno geek to understand how it works. You just learn how to use it," Dr. Gill shares. She further explains that the template-based system is about a nine out of 10 as far as ease of use.

According to Dr. Gill, "RANAC has been very receptive to our needs. They stuck with us and worked to get things done. They worked around our office full of patients". She adds that the system implementation was challenging because it took place in a temporary office, then was relocated to the newly built office space.

RANAC president Keith Pitzele points out that the benefits Drs. Gill and McIntire received can easily be replicated in other primary care and specialist offices. "It takes more than providing the tools (EHR, PM and DM) for a paperless office, it takes know how and experience to implement a successful transition. That's what we bring to the table." he states.

While more hospitals are moving to EHR, only one-third of large medical practices and less than one-tenth of small practices have adopted EHR, according to Markle Foundation, a nonprofit group focused on information technology and public policy. Pitzele states that the industry is clearly expecting significant growth due to increased interest in EHR.

"I'm so glad we did it," claims Dr. Gill. She states the system is very customizable and communicates within the different components. "EMRs are just a godsend." She adds that for a multi-site physician practice where patients are seen in multiple locations, EHR would be ideal.