

Electronic Medical Records

Mark Spencer, MD

I introduced electronic medical records (EMR) in my practice in April this year, hoping to streamline office workflow. Six months later, I can report that using EMR has not only begun to help streamline our office workflow, but also has the unexpected benefit of being greatly appreciated by our patients. Equally important, our EMR links us to the larger healthcare community, making it easy to communicate with local hospitals, labs, pharmacies and specialists.

As the president of a small, full-spectrum family medical practice in Arlington, Washington, I wanted to take advantage of current technology. With 30 employees—including three physicians, two nurse practitioners and two physicians' assistants—we generate considerable paperwork and constantly need to get and share information about patients.

Three years ago, while participating on a medical team in Guatemala, a colleague explained how using electronic medical records positively impacted his office. After evaluating about 15 different systems, I decided to use ChartConnect because it was the easiest to set up and had the right package of features for my practice. This turned out to be an excellent decision and made a significant difference in managing patient records, sharing records with other organizations, and overall office administration.

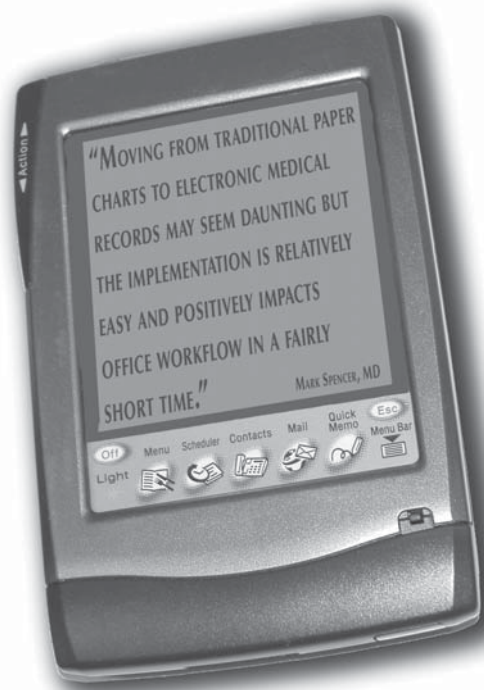
We are especially impressed with how this type of online system connects our office with healthcare partners in the local community. It definitely simplifies hospital admittance by eliminating the need to dictate and then transcribe information because we can print out, fax or electronically send critical information quickly and accurately. This also applies to managing prescriptions with pharmacies as well as to handling referrals. After seeing a patient, we now send information electronically to our referral coordinator, who can securely route lab results, radiology reports and transcriptions.

In my experience, there are three key benefits to using electronic medical records:

1. **Secure accessibility:** I now have access to information from any place, including hospitals, when I'm on call, at home or even on vacation;
2. **Ability to import and export information, not just store information:** Laboratories are able to send results directly to the EMR so that all information is in one place, in electronic form. Also, patients appreciate that I can send a prescription directly to the pharmacy; and the pharmacy is relieved because they can easily read it.
3. **Flexibility:** I can input information in whatever form is most comfortable, whether it's dictation, voice recognition or using custom templates.

Another important benefit of switching to electronic medical records is the major reduction of chart pulls. Even in the early stages it has reduced the need to pull charts. With an estimated \$3-5 cost per chart pull, using this is very cost efficient since it has already reduced our chart pulls by about 50%.

Everyone in our office utilizes the new system, beginning with the receptionist creating the encounter to let us know the patient is here; to the nurse who enters vital signs and initial complaints on the wireless



tablet. When I meet with a patient, I can easily and quickly read the information without wading through cumbersome charts. We still use paper charts for patients with long histories, but have implemented the EMR with new patients and transferred patients with short histories. It takes staff only about ten minutes per chart to extract basic information. It does, however, require someone with medical background to evaluate charts and complete the patient database.

While using an EMR doesn't eliminate the number of people who need to review patient information, it noticeably streamlines the process by eliminating unnecessary steps such as putting the patient record on my desk, moving it to an outbox for filing, then having someone refile

the chart—only to find that we need it again for a referral. Although three to six people still need to review patient information, using an EMR eliminates all the transfers as well as “lost” charts. And if my nurse and I both want to look at a chart, we can do it simultaneously from different places.

Personally, I find using ChartConnect cuts down on transcription since it's so easy to key in information. Physicians can use this web-based technology in a way that makes them the most comfortable, whether it's by dictation, voice recognition, writing or typing. The ability to develop custom templates for exams also is especially useful for evaluating consistent patterns. For example, if a patient is in for an ear exam, I can develop a template with the eight most common problems and it's easy to check off from a list.

The key to implementing an electronic medical record system is to first involve staff members who are early technology adopters — people who use email at home, pay personal bills online, and even play computer games. They will quickly learn to use the technology, and then you can use them as a resource to train the rest of your office team. One of our physicians is 70 years old and has been a bit reluctant to change to EMR. But he is observing that it does make workflow much easier, and I predict

he will be using it fairly soon, especially when he sees how easy it is to learn.

Using an EMR also impacts billing since it helps our billing staff input the right codes and also gives clues to coding. Twenty years ago billing was fairly simple: we would bill an insurance company and get paid. Today, it's more complex and our staff needs to understand how to properly enter codes in order to reduce claims rejections and get paid. Ultimately, using EMR will decrease the number of staff hours, saving costs or allowing people to do other things with their time.

Moving from traditional paper charts to electronic medical records may seem daunting but the implementation is relatively easy and positively impacts office workflow in a fairly short time.

One of the unexpected side-benefits of moving to electronic records has been our patients' reaction. Instead being a barrier, seeing me input their history as they give it seems to assure them I am attending to their problem. It actually creates a stronger connection and gives them a better experience.

Mark Spencer, MD, is in private practice at Cascade Family Medical Group in Arlington, Washington where he has served since 1985.