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## Medical Economics

Now that Arlene Brown, a solo FP in Ruidoso, NM, uses an electronic health record system, she eats supper with her family at a reasonable hour. She even has time to cook it herself.

"I'm usually out of the office by 5:30 p.m., or 6:00 at the latest, with all my charts reviewed, phone calls returned, and prescriptions refilled," says Brown, who bought her EHR in 2004. "My system has trimmed two hours off the work day without cutting down the number of patients I see."

If a normal home life strikes you as a compelling reason to buy an EHR, we can give you 50 more good business reasons. We collected them from EHR users like Arlene Brown as well as a few IT experts. We asked them to go beyond the generalities of "saves time" and "improves patient care" and identify how the technology makes a specific difference in a medical practice. You might be surprised by what you read.

"Many doctors are vaguely aware of the advantages of the EHR," notes Rosemarie Nelson, a computer consultant with the Medical Group Management Association in Syracuse, NY. "However, they don't know how the technology connects to their day-to-day life."

To be sure, buying an EHR means overcoming some fear factors. One is the price tag. The cost of software, hardware, implementation, training, and support can easily come to \$30,000 per doctor over five years. The national push for seamless data exchange—my EHR can talk to yours—gives pause, too. Will the program that I buy today meet tomorrow's technical standards for interoperability?

Despite these concerns, doctors are finding enough positives to create a bull market for EHRs. Allscripts Healthcare Solutions, one of the companies that sells these programs, reported a 61 percent jump in revenue from software and related services in the first quarter of 2005 over the same period in 2004. Overall, the EHR field is growing at a 30-40 percent clip, says research analyst Sean Wieland, who's with the securities firm of Piper Jaffray in San Francisco.

As our readers told us, EHRs come with impressive capabilities, and we've ticked off 50 common ones. However, all products aren't created equal, says Nelson, so don't assume every EHR program will do everything on our list. But "most of the market-leading products will easily include 40 out of 50."

So check out these reasons to go paperless. Someday you can tick off your own when you sit down with the family for an early supper.

### Better access to data

1. Pull a patient chart within seconds rather than minutes.
2. Never waste time looking for a chart.
3. Open a patient's chart on any computer in the office.
4. Have two or more people work with a chart at the same time.
5. Have clinical data at your fingertips when a consulting or referring physician calls.
6. Open the patient's chart on a wireless computer when you see him in the hospital.

7. Access a patient's chart online when he calls you at home at 2 a.m.

#### Better charting

8. Never worry about illegible handwriting (your malpractice carrier and local pharmacists will be happy).

9. Have patients complete a computer-guided medical history at home or in your office that downloads into the EHR.

10. Update medication and problem lists with every visit.

11. Import lab results, diagnostic images, and hospital discharge summaries into the patient's record.

12. Create flow sheets and graphs for any kind of data—blood pressure, HbA1c, pediatric height and weight, etc.

13. Tap thousands of procedure and diagnosis codes—far more than a paper charge ticket can display.

#### Better care management

14. Track pending orders for lab tests and diagnostic imaging—those that are long overdue may signal lost reports or patient noncompliance.

15. Receive automatic reminders in the exam room when a patient is due for preventive or disease-management services.

16. Link to evidence-based guidelines for diagnosing and treating conditions as you talk to the patient.

17. Quickly produce a list of all female patients over 21 who haven't had a Pap test in the past three years (or any time frame you choose, based on age and type of Pap test). Then ask these patients to make an appointment.

18. Print patient handouts in the exam room.

19. Print a copy of the progress note and give it to the patient at the end of the visit. Or put his entire record on a mini "thumb" drive that he can take home.

20. Provide consulting physicians with a list of lab results and current medications by e-mailing or faxing the data directly from the computer.

#### Better prescribing

21. Spend less time talking to pharmacists with questions about what you've written.

22. Fax prescriptions from your computer to the pharmacy instead of handing them to patients, who might lose or alter them.

23. Reissue prescriptions with a few mouse clicks.

24. Reduce the number of prescribing mistakes by receiving electronic alerts on drug interactions, allergies, and other situations where you should exercise caution.

**25.** Identify all your patients who are taking a recalled drug within minutes.

**26.** Verify compliance with insurance-company formularies incorporated into the EHR.

Greater efficiency

**27.** Review a summary of the patient's health information at a glance instead of flipping through pages.

**28.** Stay on top of your work with an electronic to-do list that includes incoming lab, radiology, and pathology reports as well as in-office messages and telephone calls.

**29.** Reduce phone tag: When patients call, answer their questions immediately instead of pulling the paper chart and calling them back.

**30.** Produce referral letters, school and work excuses, and other documents with a few clicks.

**31.** Send messages to your nurse without leaving the exam room or hollering down the hallway.

**32.** Reduce staff downtime at the copy machine: When you need to share records with someone, transmit them electronically.

**33.** Automate the way you report childhood immunizations to state-mandated registries.

**34.** Order lab tests and diagnostic imaging with a few mouse clicks.

**35.** Get claims out the door faster by sending encounter information, including diagnostic and CPT codes, straight to your practice-management software.

Lower costs

**36.** Save \$10,000 or more per doctor per year on dictation and transcription costs.

**37.** Eliminate positions for file clerks and transcriptionists.

**38.** Save several thousand dollars a year on paper-chart supplies.

**39.** Download ECG readings directly into the patient chart and save even more on paper.

**40.** Spend less on postage by transmitting charts electronically.

**41.** Build a satellite office without a file room.

Higher income

**42.** Qualify for "pay for performance" bonuses by tracking the care you provide and the outcomes you achieve for various groups of patients.

**43.** Capture all your charges automatically as you record what you do.

**44.** Reassign your transcriptionist and file clerk to help collect accounts receivable.

**45.** Confidently code for higher levels of service based on thorough documentation.

**46.** Get automatic suggestions for E&M coding based on your documentation.

A more robust practice

**47.** Convert your file room into an extra exam room.

**48.** Gain an edge in recruiting doctors fresh out of residency who've grown up using computers.

**49.** Retain topnotch staffers who otherwise would be burned out by the chaos of paper charts.

**50.** Impress patients by demonstrating that you run a modern, cutting-edge practice.