The Cost of Automating Your Practice -- Electronic Medical Records

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Perhaps you are currently considering the move to electronic medical records (EMR) for your practice, but you are overwhelmed with questions and concerns, such as the following:

> How much will it cost?
> Can I afford to buy the software and hardware?
> How much time will it take to install the system?
> How will I personally be affected by this automation?
> Should I wait to automate until closer to the government's mandatory date?
> What about the government's *free* EMR system?

Are these questions you've asked yourself over and over again about an EMR system? Do you ask these questions and then just roll over in bed hoping that "someone" will take care of this dilemma for you? How important is EMR anyway?

Well, if you were to ask physicians from New Orleans who lost everything in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, they will tell you either they wish that had a fully operating EMR system. Or, if they were already automated, they would tell you how grateful they are to not have lost any of their patients' records.

As the saying goes, hindsight is 20/20. The vast majority of the healthcare providers in New Orleans lost all of their patients' records and have no way to reconstruct the medical histories and treatment plans from their destroyed files. Sometimes the cost of doing nothing actually costs more in the end. Now is the time to re-evaluate your office situation and decide if you need to move forward to a paperless environment. Studies have identified that the greatest challenges to full automation in a medical practice are high cost of procurement (software and hardware), implementation expenses, decreased productivity during the adjustment period, fear of the unknown by the physicians, and concerns about return on investment (ROI). Although these concerns are legitimate, none of them are true roadblocks to the successful implementation of an EMR system that meets the needs of your particular practice, whether you are a single doctor or part of a 300-physician multi-specialty facility.

> Here are some questions to consider:
> ➢ How much time and money are spent each week by your staff pulling patient charts, searching for charts, and re-filing these charts? Convert this to an annual cost.
> ➢ How much time would it take to re-create the contents of these charts if they were destroyed (assuming it was actually possible)?
> ➢ How much do you spend on your charting supplies (e.g., jackets, folders, tabs, etc.) on an annual basis?
> ➢ How much space in your facility do your paper charts consume? How could you use that space more effectively, say for another exam or treatment room, for example?
> ➢ How much do you pay annually for storing old charts? How much do you pay for properly shredding documents beyond the retention date?
> ➢ How much do you pay for transcription services on an annual basis?
> ➢ And in the event of a disaster, what is the cost of doing nothing today?

Every practice needs to make a full self-assessment and decide that it is time to look into the next step of automation, and possibly an EMR system. Please make this a priority now, and don't wait for a natural disaster to occur. You can take many steps to gradually reduce paper, improve productivity, and move into the electronic age.

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