Dermatology Coding Alert

Go With EHR to Improve Billing Accuracy, Efficiency

Easy 3-step approach takes the guesswork out of system selection

If you're not using electronic health records (EHR) yet, now's the time to consider a switch. Shelling out up-front for an EHR system can streamline your billing processes and improve your office's return on its claims in the long run.

And that's not all: EHR also speeds up patient care and reduces expenses for paying transcribers and compliance risks due to illegible documentation.

But with hundreds of EHR systems available today, suitable for every type and size of practice, where do you start? Let our experts guide you through the EHR maze to ensure you have all the information you need to choose the best system for your office.

Learn Some EHR Basics

The first question you're likely to ask yourself is: Why would my office want to pay the costs for an EHR software system? Here's why.

In simplest terms, EHR is computer-based patient health records, which replace paper patient charts and documentation. You typically access the patient's health information over a secure network, which allows for real-time information from various locations including the billing office, the exam room, and/or the front desk.

Most EHR systems include information about the your patients' current and past health, medical conditions and medical tests. You may also be able to input, store and access data about medical referrals, medical treatments, medications, and even demographic information and other non-clinical administrative information.

Important: Medical practice management (MPM) systems often integrate, or even come with, EHR systems. While some of the information in an MPM system and an EHR system will overlap--for example, patient and provider data--you'll use the EHR system for assisting the providers with clinical data while you'll use the MPM system for administrative and financial matters. For more on MPM systems, read the articles "Boost Productivity, Speed Payment With Practice Management Software," "8 Perks Ease Your Practice Management Software Decision" and "Ask the Right Practice Management Software Questions" in the February 2007 issue of Medical Office Billing & Collections Alert and "Make the Most of an MPM System by Choosing the Right Features" in the April 2007 issue.

Third-party billing companies: Think EHRs don't affect you? Think again. EHR systems "are a huge advantage for an outsourced billing company," says **Robin Roach, CEO** of Health Data Solutions in St. Albans, W.V. "As a billing company, we provide and maintain our clients' EMR systems as a value-added service to our clients at no additional charge. That's a large expense for us, so there must be a return on our investment to make it worthwhile. The prime benefit for us, being a billing company that is off-site, is that we have instant access to the patient's record."

Pick the Right System in 3 Steps

Before you go system shopping, do your research. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of EHR options to choose from. You need to make sure the product and vendor you choose will match your practice's needs.

Step 1: Look at EHR systems designed for your type of practice. Part of the reason there are so many options available now is that no one solution will work for every type of medical practice. For example, a small internal medicine

practice may need a much different system than a major multi-specialty hospital, and a dental office or mid-size cardiology practice would need yet another type of system.

"Make sure the EHR features efficiently complement your practice," says **Catherine Brink, CMM, CPC, CMSCS**, president of Healthcare Resource Management in Spring Lake, N.J. Brink recommends asking three key questions:

• Is the template customized for your doctors' documentation and can the documentation easily link to electronic claims if needed?
• Does the system have a touch screen?
• Do providers need to spend time keying in documentation, which may not be a benefit over writing using templates?

"So often, I think people try to wedge themselves into an existing EMR product. Instead, the EMR should complement the way the practice already operates," Roach says.

Step 2: Get information from other practices that are already using an EHR system. Find out what works and doesn't work for them. Compare your needs to other similar practices and get recommendations for EHR vendors and products.

Step 3: Try before you buy. Visit another office that is already using the software or ask the vendor to set up a sample account for you so you can test the software. When visiting another office, you should shadow the physician using the system so you can see all the steps. Go through each step of the system and let several people in your office try it out to see if it works for all the various functions you need it for.

Caution: Some systems may actually make your practice function inefficiently. For example, some of the more expensive EHR systems contain features that are unnecessary for a small office and may detract from the system's overall usefulness and prove more complicated and time-consuming.

The terms "electronic health record" (EHR) and "electronic medical record" (EMR) are often used interchangeably in the medical world. There is, in fact, a difference.

The EHR is all patient medical information from multiple sources, including all components of the EMR.

The EMR is the individual medical record for the patient, which includes medical history, allergies, appointment information, and much more.

Ultimately, your EHR system can and will interface with other physician and hospital systems. That integrated health record is what makes up an EHR, whereas an EMR is the individual physician's records.