

Part B Insider (Multispecialty) Coding Alert

STUDIES & SURVEYS: Physician Offices Are Behind The Times On EHRs

To get up to speed, start looking under the sofa cushions for an extra \$32,000

Experts tout electronic health records (EHRs) as the all-purpose solution to the problems of physician offices--but most offices haven't yet taken the plunge. The hurdle is cost.

Just 14.1 percent of all group practices have adopted EHRs, according to a survey of 3,000 practices released Sept. 8 by the **Medical Group Management Association**.

Only 12.5 percent of small practices with five physicians or less have adopted EHRs. And 11.5 percent of practices said they'd implemented EHRs fully for all locations and physicians, according to the study, which was funded by the **Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality**.

Size Matters

The bigger the practice, the more likely it was to go electronic: Groups with 20 or more physicians had a 19.5 percent adoption rate for EHRs. Nearly half the practices that didn't have EHRs said they planned to move to them, with 12.7 percent in the process already and 14.2 percent planning to start within a year.

Not all EHRs could handle some tasks, such as providing drug formularies or clinical guidelines and protocols. And only 83.1 percent of practices with EHRs said the EHR was integrated with their practice billing system. Practices cited the cost of EHRs as the main barrier to using them, with EHRs costing an average of \$32,000 per physician, or \$37,000 per physician at smaller practices.

Savings Could Outweigh Costs

If everybody adopted EHRs, the health care system could save \$81 billion per year, according to the September/October issue of Health Affairs, which is devoted to EHR issues. EHRs could make health care more efficient and safer, the lead article asserts. Another article argues that the federal government should launch a program on the scale of building highways to bring EHRs to every corner of the country.

But a third article, entitled "Hope and Hype," says there are a lot of "wishful thinking and special effects" when it comes to EHRs. The article points out that hospitals and clinics that have already invested in EHRs "have ended up with little to show for their large outlays."

Editor's Note: In the face of rumors that CMS would delay the release of the mostly free EHR software VistA-Office to physician offices, CMS has announced that the software is ready.