

Eli's Rehab Report

Tech Tips: 5 Reasons Why 'Getting Technical' With Your Patient Records Pays Off

The hard work and hassle of ditching paper documentation is not in vain.

If you haven't witnessed or lead a conversion from paper records to an electronic medical record (EMR) system, you're at least aware that the process is a huge undertaking that often results in even lower productivity and more confusion. So, is making the change really worth it? Experts agree that yes, going electronic is worth it. Here are a few reasons why:

1. You Open More Cash Inlets

Many research studies pull their data via electronic records. So, if you can't tune in to participate, opportunities for cash perks will fly by. "Grant money and incentive programs are available, for example, and they want data in the electronic form," points out **Francine Wheelock, PT, MPA**, manager of clinical systems for MaineGeneral Health.

Just look at nationwide push for value-based purchasing and outcome data, and expect to go electronic if you want to be in the loop.

Stay alert: Last year, the federal government launched the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act, which plans to pay eligible healthcare professionals incentives for the "meaningful use" of certain EMRs.

"SLPs, OTs and PTs are not eligible for the incentive payment," confirms **Kate Romanow**, director of health care regulatory advocacy for the American Speech-Language Hearing Association. But they may be eligible in the future, so therapists "may want to consider implementing EHRs now," she says.

Plus, you can enhance coordination of care with healthcare providers who are eligible for HITECH incentives and are adopting EHRs, points out **Sarah Nicholls**, assistant director for payment policy and advocacy for the American Physical Therapy Association. So, "think about your business interactions today with those that are eligible."

2. Quality of Care Gets a Boost

Electronic systems often offer access to a database of national outcomes data from users of the same software -- a jewel for measuring and improving your care. **Another perk:** Many of the systems will connect you to research on best practices for treating certain diagnoses, Wheelock notes. "Thus, an EMR can really help drive evidence-based practice."

Electronic systems can also help standardize your care. "For example, if your practice sees the same diagnoses very frequently, you could build shells for care plans so that you have some standardization of care to start with, Wheelock adds.

3. Your Clients Expect EMRs

If you work for a rehab agency or are an independent contractor, whoever's buying your rehab services wants to see a modern operation. "Switching to an EMR is important because when a customer wants you as the vendor to do so, you need to continue to meet the customer's expectation," says **Kate Brewer, PT, MBA, GCS**, VP of Greenfield Rehabilitation Agency in Greenfield, Wis.

Another thought: A more modern feel in your clinic may also help attract new patients who are shopping around for a therapist and are alert to small details like being current with the times.

4. Mistakes Get Caught in Their Tracks

Forget to include a start date on your plan of care? Ready to code a claim and miss a CCI edit? Electronic billing and documentation systems can catch these types of errors before they cost you money.

How: "Whether it's for a billing purpose, a compliance purpose, or a best practice, you can program a documentation system to force users to answer certain questions before proceeding," Wheelock explains.

"We have made good progress [with our EMR], and it's definitely improved our clean claims, improved our compliance, and helped train the therapists in how to do good documentation," cheers **Garry Woessner, MACCC, MBA, CAS**, regional director of Benedictine Health System in Minneapolis.

You can save yourself the hassle of certain HIPAA violations, too. "I used to be in home care, and until we went to an EHR, charts would get lost," Wheelock recalls. "In addition, there was no way to know, unless you physically went in and looked at every chart, if someone was tardy with their billing."

5. Easy Access Makes Life Easier

Implementing an EMR system is hard work, but the convenience of pulling up a patient record in a matter of seconds -- and having it portable, too -- is worth its weight in gold.

Example: Consider home care therapists who are driving around to different sites and need to get patient history from a central server. Linking to a server remotely is now possible, and some EMR systems will even let you do so through a phone line, Wheelock says. The ability to connect to a central database is also a huge convenience for therapy organizations with multiple sites.

In fact, easy access to a patient record is important for any facility. Take, for example, a SNF setting working with a therapist shortage. "One therapist may be moving around to different facilities to see patients, thus not always available on site to discuss the patients with nursing," Wheelock proposes. But with an EMR in place, "the nurse, who's still back in the facility, can pull up the therapy information very easily and quickly if she needs to."