

Health Information Compliance Alert

Technology: Are You Using EMR Yet? Don't Get Left Behind

Here's how you can make interoperable records a reality.

Think you have to sit back and wait for interoperable electronic medical records (EMR) to materialize? Think again.

EMR proponents have been hard at work developing model electronic records systems that can communicate across networks and organizations while keeping PHI out of unauthorized users' reach.

Since the move towards EMR adoption is well underway in practices nationwide, you risk being left behind unless your organization is fully engaged in implementing the latest wave in medical records technology.

How to get started: "Talk to key personnel from every department in your facility to brainstorm how EMRs could be used to improve efficiencies and improve patient care, suggests **Debbie Larios**, an attorney with Miller & Martin in Nashville, TN.

Next step: Once you have a stronger idea of what you want to get out of EMRs, open your talks to other providers, insurers and health care organizations in your area, Larios recommends. That way, you can get a baseline idea of what standards and technologies are being used -- and how much it will cost to get everyone on the same page.

Important: Be sure to include privacy and security compliance efforts in your discussion, Larios notes. Even the most organized consortium is only spinning wheels if its members can't agree on basic security measures. For example, a provider who strongly enforces encryption and one who thinks encryption is unreasonable must find common ground.

Take Advantage of RHIOs, State Departments

Regional health information networks (RHIOs) are currently operating in most states and many receive supplements straight from the **Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality**. EMR supporters expect that the RHIOs will build their own electronic networks that can then be connected -- creating one large national network, explains **John Casillas**, director of the Medical Banking Project in Franklin, TN.

Action plan: You or key members of your organization should work with your RHIO to create an electronic records system that works for providers in your area. After you've smoothed out local interoperability issues, you'll be in a better position to set the tone for less advanced RHIOs in other areas, Casillas says.

And you don't have to shoulder the full financial burden of stepping into the EMR arena, Casillas claims. There are government and private funding opportunities available if you know where to look.

Who to call: "Start by talking to your state's health department, health commissions and other state health associations," Larios advises. This will help you figure out what's happening with EMRs at the state level so you don't duplicate work, she adds.

Bonus: Money's not the only resource available to those interested in electronic health networks, Casillas asserts. ONCHIT encourages health IT collaboratives and offers several models for establishing one successfully. Next step: Go to <http://www.os.dhhs.gov/healthit> for detailed information.

The bottom line: Your active participation in the development of a national electronic health network will allow your organization to control the process better and drive the industry forward at the same time.

