

HIM Role in Bringing e-HIM to Small Practices

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In order for the nation's health IT strategy to succeed, small physician practices must adopt electronic health records (EHRs). The transition of the paper-based small physician practice to the digital world will require a fundamental understanding of the practice and the deployment and management of a practice-wide IT solution.

HIM professionals are ideally suited to assist physicians in this transformation. Change management leadership, communication skills, and HIM knowledge and expertise are just a few of the competencies needed to mitigate the risks associated with achieving e-HIMTM in the physician practice.

Knowing What's Needed

Approximately 78 percent of physicians in the US practice alone or in small groups of eight physicians or fewer, and according to recent research from the Medical Group Management Association, only one group physician practice in five has adopted EHRs. In fact, 69 percent of these small practices still use paper records.^{1,2}

Small group practices approach EHRs very differently than their large group counterparts. Small practices lack the capital for automation and generally have no dedicated in-house IT support. Further, a failed EHR implementation can set a small practice back several months in revenue, cash, and patient satisfaction. Such a failure can be potentially catastrophic to an emerging practice.

A necessary prerequisite to realizing the benefits of a paperless practice for a small physician practice is a practice-wide IT solution. At a minimum, a fully integrated solution includes an EHR, physician practice management (PPM) system, patient scheduling system, office automation, and ongoing IT support.

Small group practices should first document the practice's clinical and business objectives for EHR implementation and how it will integrate with other pieces of the IT solution. Each practitioner in a group practice may have different expectations regarding the benefits of implementation. Some may want the EHR to make documentation easier, while others may want quick retrieval of information to be the top priority. Others may place primary importance on the ability to quickly refill prescriptions and share data with others. It is important that all providers ultimately accept and reach consensus on their common EHR objectives.

Physician acceptance of the system will rely on speed of data entry and flexibility. Clinical reminders and alerts for individual patients and populations of patients will also be fundamental for the improvement of quality and management of patient safety. Sophisticated reporting capabilities that are patient-, diagnosis-, procedure-, and population-centric are also required for the long term.

However, cash flow is critical to small practices. In considering the move to a fully digital practice, practices may first need to upgrade or replace an existing practice management system. If the existing system is acceptable, planning can begin for the selection of the EHR. However, it's important to establish a complete systems view of the practice to enable the appropriate staging or phasing of the IT project.

The benefits of deploying a practice-wide IT solution and the corresponding HIM role to enable and assist practices to achieve these benefits are provided in "EHR Benefits and HIM Roles" below. Multiple roles are identified for a number of benefits in order to emphasize the granularity of the role. In a small practice, a single individual may be responsible for many of the roles, whereas in a large, multispecialty practice, the roles may be more specialized.

EHR Benefits and HIM Roles

Benefits of IT Solution

Instant, ubiquitous access to patient health data

Achievement of paperless practice

Elimination of paper from the practice (e.g., bills, lab orders, referrals, prescriptions, results distribution)

Increased practice revenue and profitability

Reduction or elimination of transcription costs

Improved workflow, increased productivity

Improved accuracy and timeliness of billing, clean claims, and record documentation

Reduction in the risk of malpractice (i.e., decreased risk of medical errors, increased thoroughness of documentation, higher patient satisfaction)

HIPAA compliant

Improved quality of patient visit (i.e., patient satisfaction, education, and compliance reminders)

Improved quality of care—clinical decision support, physician performance measurement, healthcare outcomes research

Attracting new patients

HIM Roles

EHR system manager

Health IT solutions designer or manager

EHR project or implementation manager

EHR system manager

IT training specialist

Health records requirements specialist

Clinical data manager, clinical coding specialist

Business process engineer

Clinical vocabulary manager

EHR project or implementation manager

Workflow and data analyst

Business process engineer

EHR project or implementation manager

Revenue cycle manager

Data quality and integrity manager

Clinical data manager

Clinical vocabulary manager

Clinical alerts and reminders manager

Data security, confidentiality, and privacy manager

Consumer advocate

Patient education handout librarian

Patient compliance analyst or manager

Data analyst

Data broker

Data presenter

Consumer advocate

Consumer marketing coordinator

Criteria for Success

Ultimately, physicians will purchase an EHR to increase practice efficiency and achieve a higher, more sustained level of timely, complete, and accurate documentation in the health record. Selection, implementation, and full utilization of the EHR can be achieved by careful attention to the criteria necessary for success. To be successful, the practice should:

- Identify an EHR champion who will shepherd the practice through the change process. The HIM professional will work closely with this champion. In some instances, the HIM professional may be the champion; however, it's critical that a clinician be identified as a super user.
- Document practice requirements and physician expectations in a simply stated request for proposal. Ask prospective vendor partners to respond to the proposal.
- Test drive the EHR on a site visit, over the Internet, or with a downloaded version before making a final commitment.
- Achieve unanimous agreement to implement the EHR solution selected.
- Develop an implementation project plan and communicate milestones and expectations practice-wide.
- Analyze all documented and undocumented workflows (clinical, administrative, and financial) for transition to the EHR. Expect to re-engineer many if not all workflows in order to achieve the practice's value proposition or return on investment. Involve the staff in this process to achieve the broadest input possible.
- Plan to engage technical and process support for system planning, implementation, and ongoing support.
- Integrate the EHR with the PPM system. Plan to fully interface the ancillary clinical systems to the EHR.
- Allow maximum amount of time for training and system acceptance by staff.
- Reduce patient load when the system first goes live and for two to three weeks after initial implementation.

- Utilize an application service provider deployment model, which will eliminate high up-front costs and minimize the need for costly IT staff on-site.
- Implement a process to continuously monitor and improve the EHR and other systems on a regular basis.

A Final Note

HIM professionals understand that the success of EHR implementation will rest on the physician's perspective and acceptance of the system. It's critical to keep the user perspective in the forefront at all times—the more user-friendly and intuitive the better. Take the time to fully understand how the physician documents—shadow the physician and record the workflow. Speed of data entry is critical for productivity. Count the clicks it takes to document, because they will. Remember that you gain physician acceptance one physician at a time. User acceptance is individual and personal. Identify the potential super users (also known as power users) who will help continue training and support post implementation.

These are exciting times for HIM professionals looking to further their careers working in the physician practice environment. Review the variety of roles presented here and take the initiative to invest in the development of new skills or competencies that will provide you with the necessary foundation to be part of e-HIM in physician practices.

Notes

1. Chin, Tyler. "Small Practices Fuel Sales of EMR Systems." *AMNews*, February 9, 2004. Available online at www.ama-assn.org/amednews/2004/02/09/bil20209.htm.
2. Versel, Neil. "One in Five Group Practices Now Use EHRs." *Health IT World* January 25, 2005. Available online at www.health-itworld.com/enews/01-25-2005_508.html.

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