n theory, a podiatry practice implements an EHR system to address specific issues, such as meeting Meaningful Use (MU), taking advantage of incentives, and avoiding the possibility of future penalties. In practice, though, it’s a theory that has issues.

Some podiatrists are reluctant to invest the time and money to make the switch to an EHR. Many podiatrists, especially those who have been practicing for years, are reluctant to implement new technologies. They fail to understand all its advantages, or may be planning to sell their practice in five to 10 years and don’t want to navigate the transition.

The reasons to avoid switching to an EHR may seem valid. Yet, when you look at the benefits, they far outweigh any perceived negatives. Many successful podiatry practices that switch to EHRs do experience a few months of growing pains, but shortly thereafter, begin to notice significant improvements in workflow, efficiency and cost savings.

Many of us are imbued with a strong American work ethic. But there is a big difference between working hard and productively, and working harder than necessary to compensate for shortcomings. The EHR helps run a podiatry practice much more efficiently. It’s as simple as that.

**Resistance Is Futile**

Most professionals nowadays at-

**The reasons to avoid switching to an EHR may seem valid. Yet, when you look at the benefits, they far outweigh any perceived negatives.**
files to the various primary care physicians in their network. This method seems to be working well; they have good referring doctors and excellent patient flow. However, now many of them notice they are facing increasing demands for faster turnaround time on records and possible future federal penalties if they don’t digitize their practices.

Choosing a Vendor

Various vendors offer EHR solutions. It is important to choose a company that provides excellent training and customer service, along with a billing and practice management system.

Getting to Know EHR

After EHR installation, it is advisable to use templates that can be created in collaboration with your EHR provider, though they may also come pre-loaded in the software or can be created by the physician. These templates are helpful, at first, to organize the changeover. When implementing an EHR, identify a vendor willing to work with you on personalizing your system. Note that dictation can be handled by employing an EHR solution compatible with your speech recognition software. For any practice, an EHR should include podiatry-specific diagnoses, with good stock templates of procedures and procedural codes for use as needed.

Most practices require both ICD and CPT codes in their EHR. One solution is to use a system that automatically inserts these codes into the software for quick billing. The theory is that this process eliminates the need for an employee to manage this task, thereby freeing up the staff member’s time to work on other aspects of the practice.

An additional consideration when upgrading to an EHR is the capability to integrate digital images directly into the patient record.

Getting to Know MU (Meaningful Use)

The federal government introduced the concept of MU—and its monetary incentives propelling EHR adoption—to help ensure that the information incorporated is utilized in a meaningful capacity for reducing cost and improving patient care. To make sure podiatrists receive incentives, any EHR under consideration must be capable of automatically generating the data needed for MU attestation.

Today, some podiatrists have already attested for Stage 1 MU and received reimbursements. Some are even well on their way to successfully attesting to Stage 2. The MU guidelines are stringent, but can be easily managed with the assistance of a good software team. It also helps if the system employs a built-in MU dashboard.

An additional consideration when upgrading to an EHR is the capability to integrate digital images directly into the patient record.

Reasons for the Switch

What were the key reasons for implementing the EHR? There are several factors to consider including the turnaround time for dictation. Without an EHR, busy practices can take 10 to 14 days to complete records. This makes it difficult to run a fluid practice and to report back to referring doctors in a timely manner. The EHR allows these specialists to send exam transcripts within minutes of completing a patient visit.

Before implementing an EHR, podiatrists had to dictate notes, print images, use a punch-hole to attach them to patient files and send hard copy charts to referring doctors. This is time-consuming and labor intensive.

Beginning this year, failure to adopt an EHR system will impact Medicare reimbursements by about two percent annually. Over time, that kind of reduction will catch up with any practice. If the practice is fairly busy, that can be a significant amount of money. In many cases, Medicare patients comprise about half of a practice.

Growing Pains

Hiccups can and do occur when implementing software solutions. For example, problems can occur due to unforeseen occurrences such as power outages or natural disasters. But, for the most part, transitioning to an EHR is easy, provided the necessary steps are taken.

If you have more than one office, it is important to have a virtual private network that enables all locations to communicate effectively with the server.

With increased productivity, workflow and incentives, an EHR system more than pays for itself. Now, many podiatrists can zip through schedules and complete patient charts on the same day. In the pre-EHR period, many practitioners would often have no time to dictate notes between patients. They would need to arrive at the office early in the morning just to catch up on a stack of charts—amounting to at least an hour’s worth of dictation before starting the day. The EHR makes completing paperwork so much more efficient, allowing more time for patient care.

Ultimately, the day will come when practices without EHRs will cease to exist.

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EHR AND PODIATRY

Stepping Up (from page 88)

Advice for Startups

If you’re just beginning your career and looking to buy a practice, purchase one that has an EHR system in place. If it is lacking, definitely factor EHR adoption into your price negotiations.

Follow the Binary Road

All incoming students and soon-to-be practitioners are born and raised on EHRs. At medical schools, now it’s all EHR. Younger generation podiatrists are much more computer savvy and adaptive than prior generations because they’ve grown up with the technology.

Many high school students no longer use textbooks for class. Their textbooks and note taking is done on iPads. Thirty years ago, schools had computer labs which were basically big rooms filled with glorified, giant word processors. Now, everybody has a computer on their phone. The world has exploded with technology in that time span.

Given that, you either embrace technology or get run over by it. You should chose to do your best to use it as a tool to enhance your practice, not run from it, and you will be glad you did.

The Bottom Line

Should podiatrists go ahead and make the transition to EHRs? Absolutely. Your practice may be somewhat slower and a little bit inefficient for a few months. However, as stated earlier, the transition will happen quickly. In just a short time, your practice should be much more efficient compared to your pre-EHR days.

Ultimately, the day will come when practices without EHRs will cease to exist. Hospitals, radiology centers, referring physicians, labs and other medical facilities will want to work only with and refer among practices that have an EHR. Patients will demand that as well. Patients will take comfort in knowing that their medical data is stored securely and backed up rather than located in highly vulnerable paper files.

Many of today’s seasoned podiatrists will continue to work for another 20 years, at least on a part-time basis. As long as you are practicing, you need to keep up-to-date with technology. Today it’s part of the job, not a luxury.

Podiatric residents now have to know two things: medicine and the business of operating a medical practice, and technology is definitely part of that business. You can’t succeed without it! PM

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