

Top 10 Electronic Medical Record Software Features for every Physician

Just as every medical specialty has its unique requirements, all physicians have their own preferences for what is most important to them in selecting their EMR Software. So, as I sat down to create a universal list of the top 10 must-have features in an Electronic Medical Records Software (EMR Software), I included the obvious technology features, but really tried focusing on the day to day usability features while taking into account what physicians deem important in the context of being eligible to receive a number of incentive payments available from the multitude of agencies (federal and state) for implementing EMR / EHR software, that fulfill the requirement in demonstrating meaningful use of EMR / EHR software.

With the experience of working and speaking with hundreds of physicians behind me and reviewing dozens of EMR Software options, here is my list of top 10 must-have features that every physician would do well to require when evaluating the 300+ EMR solutions available in the market today (not listed in any particular order of importance as the sum of their value in whole, is greater than their value individually):

1) A fully Integrated EMR Software System as opposed to interfaced systems

Replacing an existing Practice Management application in favor of an integrated EMR Software and Medical Billing software may seem scary at first especially if a physician has been using a medical billing and practice management application for several years, but I believe that it is very important for the EMR software system to be integrated with the Medical Billing or Practice Management software application. Integration really means that they share the same database and there is no need for different data elements being pushed out from one system to another on the basis of defined business rules using an interface based on an API (Application Programming Interface). Interfaced applications work but occasionally cause for both systems to become out of sync due to buggy interfaces. Go ahead and take that desired step.

2) Integration of EMR Software with ePrescription to receive bonus payments

In 2009 and 2010 providers who use a qualified Electronic Prescribing system can earn a Bonus Payment equal to 2% of their total allowed charges through Medicare part B. By using a Certified Electronic Medical Record (EMR) which has in-built e-prescribing capability, medical practices can experience dramatic efficiency gains and enhanced patient safety. You can choose a stand-alone ePrescription application but it will mean creating yet another avoidable interface or reduced efficiency because of extra data entry operation. It is best to go in for an EMR System with inbuilt ePrescribing capabilities. Did you know that the average physician saves \$15,700 a year by using their properly integrated ePrescribing feature?.

3) Electronic Medical Record Software that supports PQRI Automation

CMS continues to expand the scope of PQRI (Physician Quality Reporting Initiative) with increased bonus payments. Physicians who satisfactorily follow PQRI guidelines and report quality-measures data for services furnished January 1, through December 31, 2009, will earn a single consolidated incentive payment of 2.0% of the estimated total allowed charges for services covered under Medicare Part B in mid-2010. These requirements are complex, and different measures will apply to each practice. The EMR Software that you select should have a built-in ability that automates the additional documentation while you are examining your patients without any additional work, or creating special reports, or cost. Additionally your EMR Software should make it easy for you to modify and add customized metrics for your practice as required.

4) Electronic Medical Software with adaptive learning

Adaptive learning refers to the ability of the EMR Software to remember how each physician documents and allows previous data entry to suggest steps in treatment and documentation going forward. In essence, the EMR Software keeps track of how all users document within the system and "remembers" lists and assessments such as frequently used lists, previous patient generated lists, and prompts physicians based on previously documented diagnosis/ assessments by the physician...the system adapts to each provider's practice patterns, configuring itself automatically. The more you use the EMR Software, the more it learns and the more accurate, faster, and well documented your patient encounters become, saving you time and money.

5) Secure Portability and access to your electronic medical records even without an internet connection

Typically, physicians should have access to patient data anytime, anywhere either by using their own laptop or tablet pc, or an off-site desk top by accessing a server over a secure internet connection. However, there may be many instances when the physician is making trips to hospitals, satellite clinics, at a conference, or traveling where internet access may not be available or you lose internet connectivity at your Clinic, or your server goes down. Thus, your EMR Software application must be able to save selected data including, charts for that day's or the next few week's appointments and your most active or recent patient records, on the provider's tablet pc or laptop. This critical function allows you and your medical staff to continue working and seeing patients, charting, writing Rx's, review patient records, and then, once you return to your main Clinic, or your internet access is restored, your portable device should easily or automatically synchronize right back up with your server. Essentially, you never skip a beat. As an added note, it is imperative that you have the appropriate security measures in place in order to safeguard access to all of your portable devices.

6) Integrated patient portal - Keeping more in-touch with your patients

Your EMR Software needs to provide your practice with an integrated patient portal that allows patients to connect with your practice in ways that will improve their loyalty and compliance, and have access to key personal health information. Patient portals (or secure patient access to information you authorize) have been traditionally thought of as just allowing patients to provide access to their medical records to other consulting physicians but now, you need an EMR Software that supports a patient portal that also allows for appointment scheduling, re-fill requests, exchanging secure messages with physicians and other clinical staff, patient education and other health information, and

much more. Your patient portal should also be able to be extended and integrated with a website that is customized to your specific needs and helps you to generate new patients on a daily basis.

7) Electronic Medical Record Software that does not box you into rigid templates

Many Electronic Medical Record Software solutions provide pre-defined templates that can only be changed by the vendor or IT personnel. However, a growing number of EMR solutions are now template free which is because they are driven by 'Chief Complaint(s)'. Since the system is "CC-driven", it allows the doctor to "chart at the speed of thought" without being tethered to a template or form that may not fit the particular patient that is being charted. This is proven to offer significant speed in charting over template based systems, especially at point-of-care since the physician can navigate to any screen or function at anytime without having to leave a template.

Look for Electronic Medical Record Software that offers the best of both worlds : it is template free but can also use templates, known as COMMON PROBLEM PALETTES. This allows physicians to use predefined templates or forms to document very common and repetitive procedure and visits.

In any case, ensure it delivers clinical documentation that is flexible and flows in the natural order of how you want to proceed during a patient visit.

8) Document and Image Management

Your EMR Software should go beyond simply scanning and attaching documents and make sure it provides a complete records management system built into the application. Your EMR Software must be able to either copy documents into the EMR database or link to files without copying. This can be particularly helpful with PACS images and other very large files. Your EMR Software must also enable attaching documents and images to a patient chart at the click of a button and then, make sorting and searching for any kind of document, image or even video as simple as using your email or cell phone.

9) Integrated with voice recognition and handwriting recognition

Integration of speech recognition technology in the EMR Software is not an option anymore. When we talk about speech recognition, we implicitly talk about compatibility with Dragon NaturallySpeaking software. With advancement in technology, it is possible for a physician to achieve 98%+ accuracy rate which is at par with the accuracy that is achieved by a human medical transcriptionist. Speech recognition is traditionally utilized to capture the historical portion of the medical health record since pre-designed templates can not anticipate the full spectrum of facts presented by the patient.

Your EMR Software must also allow the physicians to follow their own preferences for documentation method - handwriting recognition, point and click with stylus, typing or a combination. As you become more comfortable with using your stylus, you will find that it is much easier for you to write on your tablet PC (just as you would scribble on a writing pad) and the handwriting recognition capabilities of the EMR Software converts natural handwriting into ready for use digital information.

10) Meets all regulatory and compliance requirements

Your EMR Software must satisfy all mandatory Federal and State regulatory and compliance reporting, general reporting requirements, and appropriate coding documentation. The other upside of requiring that these features be built-into your Electronic Medical Records Software, is that this is extremely important to qualifying each provider in your practice to receive all the incentives available for EMR from Federal and State agencies. Additionally, many malpractice insurance carriers offer Physicians a substantial discount for having an Electronic Medical Record software with these functionalities.

11) OOPS! One more important point. If all you did was to require these top 10 must-have EMR Software features from a vendor, you can rest assured that you will also get all of the other essential, most up-to-date, and easy to roll-out and use functions, found in the leading EMRs today, as well.

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