

EHR Meaningful Use Guidelines Lead to Patient Care Benefits

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I have been asked to write about my experience with an electronic health record and please keep in mind that I am a physician and not a writer. It could also be said to please remember that I am a physician and not an IT specialist but that has not stopped me from being involved in the implementation of two electronic health records (EHRs). This writing exercise has been a good reminder for me of the value of our EHR. "There are benefits" will be the mantra that gets me through the inevitable glitches that come with an intimate involvement with a computer in the various aspects of our lives.

The key to making an EHR work, in my opinion, is customization. Not even every office in the same specialty will have the exact same requirements in an EHR. We spent time making templates that were specific to our needs with our first EHR and with small adjustments here and there I thought we had created ourselves a very helpful and user friendly system to improve our patient care. For one thing, we could all read each others notes and therefore had a better idea of where things were to go or what had already been done. When we changed to another system, due to changes within the EHR's company structure, we found that customization was again important to get the most out of the system. I was lucky to have a very talented IT savvy employee to work with my clinical judgment to make a pretty good system. **The benefit that is coming realized more with each passing week is the EHRs tie to the guidelines for meaningful use.**

Customization of the templates used in an EHR is just the tip of the iceberg. What the meaningful use guidelines have given us is a starting place to see how well a system can be utilized. Our office uses electronic interfaces with labs in town so when we put an order in it is available at the lab (even if the patient loses the slip or the fax does not go through). Same type of thing can be said for electronic prescriptions. There is much less of a black hole, almost none really, in the land of e prescriptions than there is in fax land. The patient summary we print out at the end of the visit is a great chance to write oral rehydration instructions (that are legible) or any other important piece of information that we want to get home to mom when dad brings them in for their appointment (clearly I am a pediatrician). We can easily write a physical form or referral letter within the system that attaches to the chart immediately (no scanning is what that means). When calls come back closer to the registration for school and the physical forms were lost then they can be printed out with our signature and we do not have to do the work twice. Our faxes come electronically into our computer work list (again no scanning) and they can be dealt with if working at a satellite office or from home after the kids go to sleep. We have opened our patient portal system and patients can make appointments online, request refills, set up payment options.

What meaningful use has done for us is allowed us to take a closer look at all the things that an EHR can do beyond documenting a visit. Although there is time invested in setting up the system and the learning curve in changing how we do the things in our profession that are beyond patient care, it is time well spent. My partners and I are always coming up with new ideas of how to use the EHR to improve our patient care and so far we have been able to find a way to make the system fit our needs. Meaningful use is just the beginning that can be applied to more of the masses but I implore you all to not stop there.

LaTouche Pediatrics has three Anchorage/Eagle River clinic locations with 18 providers. As AeHN members, they have used REC services to help meet Phase 1 Meaningful Use through the State's Medicaid Incentive Program. They use an EHR from Allscripts.