

Healthcare Cost Containment



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Achieving Maximum Value from EMRs

By Brian Levy

By enhancing clinical interoperability of EMRs, organizations can help hospitalists better document the care they provide—improving quality of care and reducing costs.

The explosive growth of hospitalists is presenting hospitals with an unparalleled opportunity to improve quality and lower costs through the use of electronic medical records (EMRs).

More than 50 percent of the country's hospitals use hospitalists. Experts estimate that the number of hospitalists in the United States will grow by 50 percent over the next two years—from 20,000 in 2008 to 30,000 in 2010. Several factors are driving this trend: The use of hospitalists can reduce average length of stay by 10 percent to 20 percent, and hospitalists can help family practice physicians achieve a balance between career

and quality of life.

EMRs have the potential to help healthcare organizations deliver improved quality of care and reduce the costs associated with providing care, but most organizations haven't achieved these benefits, partly because their disparate clinical systems don't talk to each other. This lack of interoperability prevents hospitalists from accessing complete, up-to-date information at the point of care, which would significantly boost efficiency while enhancing quality of care and patient safety. Although many hospitals that employ hospitalists enable their hospitalists to access patient

information, some organizations' EMR systems don't allow hospitalists to electronically document the care they provide. Instead, these hospitalists are documenting on paper, creating patient care delays and other inefficiencies.

Hospitals can maximize their investment in EMRs by making their systems interoperable and installing EMRs that allow hospitalists to input information instead of merely providing them with the ability to "read" patient information. Doing so will also help hospitals differentiate themselves from competitors, making them the healthcare destination of choice for patients.

The Benefits of Interoperability

Generally, hospitalists are either employed by healthcare organizations or are contracted. While hospital-employed hospitalists don't have to do their own

billing, contracted hospitalists do, which means that they must use two systems: the hospital's EMR and an electronic or paper-based system to capture the information need to bill an organization for their services, comply with quality reporting initiatives, and collect extra pay from pay-for-performance initiatives. This results in duplicate data entry by both healthcare organizations and hospitalists.

Hospitals can make life easier for hospitalists by enabling them to export data from the hospital billing system into their system, and vice versa. A two-way data exchange would give both parties access to more comprehensive data that would allow them to continuously work on quality improvement initiatives and develop evidence-based best practices. It would produce better outcomes and higher quality scores for the organization—which would ultimately boost revenue.

Today, insurers and scores of other public and private organizations rate the


quality and efficiency of providers based on billing data. Utilizing clinical data would provide much more accurate and actionable data, but most hospitals aren't capturing these data yet. Interoperability and a two-way exchange of data with hospitalists will help organizations capture data that most accurately reflect their quality of care and efficiency.

By meeting the IT needs of hospitalists and ensuring full interoperability between all systems, healthcare organizations also can:

- > Collect better data for evidence-based medicine
- > Improve patient hand-offs
- > Strengthen relations with primary care physicians by enabling them to electronically access their patients' data, which will encourage them to refer patients
- > Gain a competitive edge in recruiting and retaining hospitalists, who are in high demand, but short supply

Strategies for Achieving Interoperability

To achieve interoperability, hospitals can:

- > Enable hospitalists to extract and synchronize information from the hospital information system and vice versa, so that neither side has to enter data twice
- > Buy inpatient EMRs that have been certified by the Certification Commission for Healthcare Information Technology, which in late 2007 began certifying hospital systems that meet its interoperability, privacy, and security criteria
- > Install middleware that can map the proprietary standards present in most EMRs to standardized medical terminologies and other data standards
- > Roll out computerized physician order entry, which will enable hospitals to capture valuable clinical data in a structured format 

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