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# Implementing EMRs One Step at a Time

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**E**lectronic medical records (EMRs) are very likely going to increase practice productivity and boost quality of care, but how should you put such a system into practice to ensure these benefits? Implementation of an EMR system is a task that requires research, planning, organization, and leadership since it encompasses the entire operation of the practice. Asking the right questions may be the key to your success.

## First, Prepare Staff

- Designate a group to be responsible for implementation of the new system.
- Ensure that these individuals have strong leadership skills and will take ownership of the project, leading the rest of the staff through the transition.
- Get buy-in from all professional and administrative staff.
- Lay out a time line of short- and long-range goals and keep everyone informed about progress.

## Evaluate Your Needs

- Where would you and your partners like to be with an EMR in 3 to 5 years?
- What do you want to document in the electronic chart?
- Are you looking to have a complete EMR, or are your goals to include a combination of paper and electronic charting? (See "*Paper is the Enemy*" on page 22 of

the September/October issue of *MPM* at: [www.medicarepatientmanagement.com/issues/02-05/mpmSO07-PaperWelters-0827.pdf](http://www.medicarepatientmanagement.com/issues/02-05/mpmSO07-PaperWelters-0827.pdf).)

- Do you want a system that can be tailored to suit your individual needs?
- What management capabilities do you want?
- Do you plan to extrapolate and trend data that are entered in the record? Would your ideal system be able to complete internal audits, track productivity, decrease the amount of time your staff spends writing notes, and increase their time with patients?

## Budgeting

- How will you pay for the system?
- If startup money is an issue, begin looking into funding options (grants or loans) now.

- Consider lease/purchase options for software and hardware.

## Research Products

- Attend conferences and visit the EMR vendors.
- Pay attention to trade journal advertisements by vendors who serve your niche.
- Ask colleagues who currently use EMR systems how they like the software and how reliable service has been.
- As a last resort complete an Internet search to find basic information about software companies.
- Be sure to look for systems that cover all your needs in one package. Integration of different components from more than one company can create ongoing or even unsolvable problems.

## Address Hardware and Technical Needs

- What kind of computers do you currently use, and what operating systems are they running? Upgrade Windows if you are running something older than Windows 2000.
- Do you have a server? If not, install one and be sure you have Internet access since many vendors update software electronically.
- Investigate how your building is networked, especially if a wire-

less network is desired for remote printing or other tasks.

- Be sure to consider backup options. How will records be accessed in the event of a power outage? Is a generator available? Does your current server have a battery backup?

### Contact Vendors

- After you've answered these questions, contact vendors and schedule demonstrations.
- Ask vendors for a proposal for systems that seem appropriate for your needs.
- Request a complete list of vendor clients and contact a few, asking to visit their practices.
- Shadow other users to get a feel for how the computer system fits into their workflow.

Remember that implementation of an EMR is a process of several months that begins long before the purchase of a system. Approach the task with an organized plan and take responsibility for the success of the EMR you select. *MPM*

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Excerpted from an article by Carmen Zirbel, RN, BSN, who is a project manager at American Data.

## PROVIDER ACTION

### Impact to You

EHRs can improve not only quality but also financial performance of a practice. This is accomplished through improvements in efficiency and effectiveness of practice systems.

### What You Need to Know

Be aware of the importance of proper preparation as you move to implement an EMR. By laying the ground work in advance of implementation, you can prevent many potential problems down the road.

### What You Need to Do

Before implementation, first prepare staff and evaluate the needs of the practice as defined by the key stakeholders. Using the needs assessment, investigate products and technical needs before contacting any vendors.