The ABCs of Implementing EMRs

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Electronic medical records (EMRs) are going to increase staff productivity, boost quality of care, and assist managers in overseeing the community, right? But how do we implement them to ensure these benefits? We all have an idea of what an EMR is, but how do we get started using one? Implementation of an EMR system is a task that requires research, planning, organization, and most of all leadership since it encompasses the entire operation of the facility. Hospitals and clinics have been implementing electronic charting systems with the assistance of consultants. But what if a facility can't afford to hire consultants? This article is intended to be a springboard for thought.

First, Prepare Staff

Designate a group to be responsible for the implementation of the new system. It is critical these persons have strong leadership roles. The group should take ownership of the project and lead staff through the transition. During the entire process keep staff informed to allow them to adjust to the idea of an EMR. Change is generally seen as a threat, and an EMR affects all staff members. Lay out a time line of both short- and long-range goals. Ensure staff that everyone will be given the time necessary to get "up to speed" on computer skills so that they can spend time doing what they do best—care for residents. Remember, by teaching staff computer skills on the job, you show them your belief

in them by backing it up with investment. And if you believe in them, they won't disappoint you.

Evaluate Your Needs

It is important to develop a vision. Where would you like to be with an EMR in 3 to 5 years? What would you like 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? Are electronic medication passes (distributing medications using electronic tracking tools) in your future?

Would you like a system that can be tailored to suit your individual needs? What management capabilities are you looking for in a system? Would you like to be able to extrapolate data that are entered in the record? Would you like a system that completes internal audits, tracks productivity, decreases the amount of time your staff spends writing notes and increase their time with the residents? Then look for everything you would like in an EMR and purchase it now. It is easiest if you purchase one system to do all clinical activities verses buy-

ing bits and pieces from different vendors. When one system is utilized, training time is significantly reduced because users only need to become familiar with one system. Also you'll save money by avoiding the need for interfaces between clinical applications that must be constantly maintained.

Address budgeting issues. How will the system be paid for? Begin looking into funding options (grants, loans, fund raisers, etc.) if you need start-up capital. While the right system should pay for itself over a very short period, there will be some upfront investment in hardware. Keep in mind too that if startup money is an issue, good software vendors may offer lease/purchase options, and leasing companies can provide hardware.

Find Out About Products

Even though an EMR is a single-digit percentage of a facility's annual budget, time should be spent investigating the options. Attend conferences and visit the EMR vendors. Pay attention to advertisements in trade journals. The benefit of finding software vendors via these

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sources is that they service your niche. Speaking with colleagues who currently use an EMR is a good source of review information. What are they using? How do they like their software? How is the support? As a last resort complete an internet search to find basic information about software companies.

Address Hardware and Technical Needs

What kind of computers do you currently use, and what operating systems are they running? Now is the perfect time to upgrade Windows if you are running something older than Windows 2000. Take a look into how your building is networked. Is a wireless network installed? If you plan to implement an electronic med pass, you will want a wireless environment. When looking to outsource information technology (IT), search for a group who has experience with networking healthcare facilities (the infrastructure is different than in most businesses). Think about other hardware needs like mounting arms for the med carts, kiosks, and backup systems. How will records be accessed in the event of a power outage? Is a generator available? Does your current server have a battery backup? Do you have a server? Do you have Internet access? Many software vendors utilize the Internet to provide support and update their software.

Contact Vendors

After obtaining a clear picture of your needs and products available to fill them, it is time to schedule demonstrations with vendors. Ask vendors for a proposal for systems that seem appropriate for your needs and request a complete list of their clients. Avoid "reference lists" because they are akin to an employee applicant listing personal references—"the deck is stacked." Contact a few clients from each vendor list and ask to visit their facilities. Seeing the product in action provides a clear picture of how it functions. Shadow other users to get a feel for how the computer system fits into their workflow. Remember, most software sales people work on commission to make their jobs worth their effort. So, keep the adage in mind that "seeing is believing" and take the time and effort to visit existing users of the systems that you are considering.

Implementation

Implementation of an EMR is a several month's process that begins before the purchase of a system. Approach the task with an organized plan and take responsibility for the success of the EMR you select. ALC

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