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CONTACT: CALLI DRETKE
936.435.7516 OR 936.714.6549

For Your Health's Sake

What Electronic Medical Records Will Mean To You

(Huntsville, TX) – Occasionally, when I'm at dinner with friends or colleagues, I'll get going on the topic of electronic medical records (EMR). As a former Chief Informatics Officer, the conversation is inevitable. Typically, my friends are good sports about the conversation but sometimes their eyes glaze over a bit and I can understand why. They understand that EMR is big in my industry, but they just don't see how it applies to anyone else outside the field of medicine or document management. When I sense friends are thinking this, I politely remind them that electronic medical records are important to everyone, not just doctors, nurses and hospital administrators and here's why.

Less Waiting Room Time, More Doctor Time

How many times do you go into a your doctor and find yourself sitting in the waiting room longer than you spend sitting across from the doctor talking to them? You know what some of that waiting room time is? That's the administrative staff physically going to the files, finding yours and pulling it. With electronic medical records, it's as easy as a search and, boom, your medical records are right there on the screen for *both* your doctor *and* you to view. That's right, no more secretive note writing in your file, you could look on the screen see your records right there, clear as day.

Natural Disasters Can Create Medical Record Disasters

Natural disasters wreak havoc on a community. They tear down homes and destroy businesses. All too often, those businesses are doctor's offices and hospitals and when that happens, what happens to your medical records? That's right, they either float away with the water, turn into a soggy pulp or disintegrate in flames. Then it's back to the drawing board with your medical history. EMR data is backed up off site so the information cannot be lost when the unthinkable occurs.

Doctors Handwriting Is Not Always Easy To Decipher

Have you ever looked at that prescription sheet before you take it into the pharmacy? Yeah. It's pretty hard to read, isn't it? Well, most of your paper medical records look the

same way. So many times, the writing on the paper records is so hard to read that nurses and other doctors mistake one word for another or they misread the dosage of a medication. Do you really want to go into the emergency room, have another doctor misread your medical file and make a medical mistake simply because the handwriting was illegible? Electronic medical records get rid of any ambiguity there might be when taking a look at a patient's file. It's all there in beautifully printed type.

Load Paper?

Most of the time your medical records get mailed and faxed from one doctor's office to another. Not only is this time consuming and expensive, it's not nearly as instantaneous as an email. Plus, I don't know about any of you, but I've never met a fax machine that I like. They're fickle pieces of machinery that work one minute and chew up your document the next.

Paper Is No Longer The Trend

Paper medical records take up a ton of space in hospitals and doctor's offices. All that space could be used for so many better purposes. That is space that could be used to better help you, the patient. More space could mean added patient rooms (thus, faster service) or it could be space for new medical technology.

So now you might be asking, what exactly is an electronic medical record? An electronic medical record system (EMR) is an interactive database that contains a comprehensive record of patients' medical histories. An electronic medical record replicates a paper chart and contains both clinical information (diagnoses, allergies, drug resistance and treatments) and demographic information about a patient; it provides a comprehensive medical picture and can be used by clinicians as a tool to determine appropriate treatment for patients. The data in the EMR is the legal record of what happened to the patient during their encounter at the care delivery organization.

The bottom line for everyone is that an EMR helps drive the quality of healthcare up! Good patient care becomes more accessible when patient data is shared among care givers. Primary Care Physicians, Specialist, Emergency Department Physician, and patients can all be looking at the same data to help insure consistency quality across the continuum of care. This ability to share data eliminates the need for repeated costly and often painful or inconvenient tests/procedures to be performed.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services also realize the value of electronic medical records. The agency has stated that they will reimburse states for 100 percent of their payments to healthcare providers participating in the federal health information technology stimulus program. Moreover, Medicare agencies can immediately apply for 90 percent in federal matching funds to cover the initial planning that will be required to launch health IT incentive payment systems in their states. The letter and a package of supporting policy documents are the first formal direction CMS has provided Medicare

agencies on how to manage the millions of dollars in incentive payments that will flow to healthcare practices under the federal stimulus law.

This will be a hard pill to swallow for some. For many physician groups, the EMR represents expensive technology that slows them down. Faced with dwindling reimbursement and increasing patient caseloads, physicians are reluctant to introduce technology that upends old habits and threatens productivity. Nonetheless, new graduates entering the field after medical school are trained to document all encounters in the medical record. This is a trend that will eventually begin knocking at the doors of all physician practices.

Huntsville Memorial Hospital realizes the importance of electronic based medical records. As an organization, we are devoted to adopting a system that is the most efficient for our patients and providers. Medical informatics plays a vital role in healthcare's future and HMH is committed to stay up to the minute with all the advancements proposed.

Sally Nelson
Chief Executive Officer
Huntsville Memorial Hospital