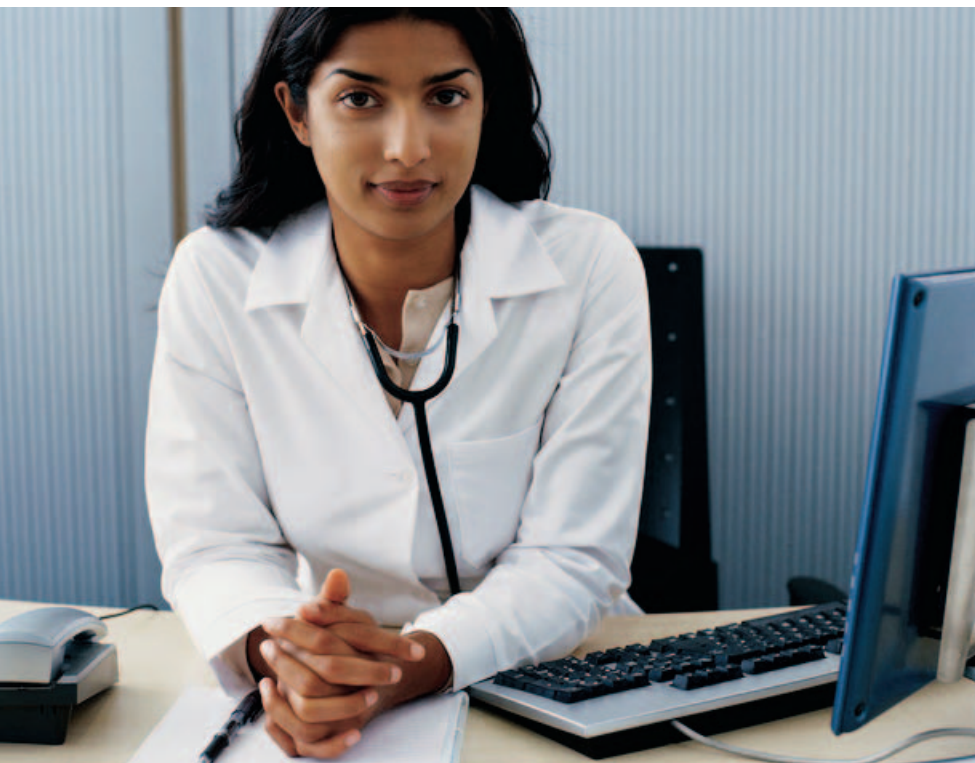


Electronic Medical Records: Bridging the Gap to Improved Patient Care

BY LES WILSON, M.D., AND VICKI ERWIN-WILSON, M.D.



Early on in our medical careers, we knew we wanted to practice medicine together as husband and wife and operate our own family practice. When we opened Wilson Family Medicine in 2002, we realized that healthcare technology was key to operating a successful practice and helping us keep everything in order. With a growing practice and eight children of our own at home, we wanted to find a system that would allow for the flexibility we needed while still providing our patients high-quality care. However, what we gained from implementing a comprehensive healthcare technology system was more than we ever could have anticipated.

Wilson Family Medicine (WFM), our two-physician practice located in Tallahassee, Florida, specializes in chronic illnesses, well-woman care, pediatrics, and minor injuries. We each work about three days a week with one nurse practitioner to see around 10,000 patients every year. In addition, our practice serves as a teaching facility for third-year medical students completing their clinical rotations at Florida State University's College of Medicine, and we teach at the local family practice residency program.

Our goal in opening WFM was to create a personal relationship with each of our patients and make visits as productive as possible. With our

large family, we understand the busy schedules that families have, and convenience for our patients and quality care have always been top priorities for the practice.

2004: WFM Goes Paperless

Two years after opening our practice, we decided it was time to adopt an electronic medical records system. After much discussion with consultants, bankers, physicians, and office managers, we decided to purchase A4 Health Systems®, now part of Allscripts, Healthmatics® Office, which provides an integrated EMR and Practice Management system. We initially used the system to transfer all our paper charts into electronic files. We began to streamline our billing, maximize appointment scheduling, authorize prescription refills, and keep track of our lab and procedure orders.

Impact

We were amazed at how quickly everyone in our office adjusted to the electronic system. It seemed that almost instantly we were running a tighter ship allowing for a smoother flow in the office. Now we schedule visits, answer questions, and conduct visits in a much more timely and productive manner. We also use the system to complete patient reports and labs at night, so that when we come into the office in the morning, we are able to immediately treat patients.

We also are spending more time with our patients. In tracking office visits, we now spend an average of an additional three to five minutes with each patient, which in today's world

of 18 minute doctor's visits, seems like an eternity. That extra time allows us to learn more about what's affecting their health and opens the line for improved communication. We also are able to access the system remotely. If we are at home, traveling, or teaching and there is an urgent matter, we can quickly respond to a patient's needs.

Due to our location in Tallahassee, our patients tend to fit into two categories, both of which are interested in the technology we use. We have a younger, tech-savvy group largely attributed to the number of local universities and government employees in the region. Many of our younger patients ask us about the types of software we use and are visibly envious of our Fujitsu wireless tablets when we walk into the room.

We also see an older group of patients, the typical Florida retirees,

who are beginning to become more technologically inclined, with growing experience in using the Internet for things such as online bill-paying. They like that we are able to walk in the exam room, pull up a chair, and show them their lab results on the system. It makes the encounter more personable and makes them feel more comfortable. They are fans of our e-prescription capabilities where we send an electronic prescription directly to the pharmacy so all they have to do is pick it up. Not only is the service more convenient, it also reduces the risk of prescription errors.

Streamlining Intra-office Communication

Our integrated EMR and PM system has streamlined daily office operations, therefore providing our patients a greater level of care. The amount of time spent transcribing information, filing documents,

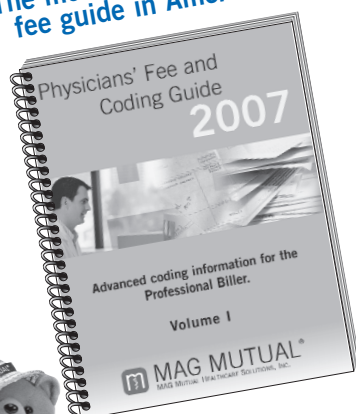
retrieving files, and running back and forth—from nurse to patient to doctor to office manager—has been greatly reduced. We all have access to patient files all the time.

With the new technology, our clinic support staff has seen major improvements in being able to communicate with patients in a more effective and timely manner. The front staff can handle more patient phone calls by opening the patient's electronic file and responding directly to inquiries without having to leave their seat and pull charts. Patients are happier because they are able to get answers to their questions more quickly. If they want to know the status of scheduling a referral appointment, the front desk can tell them the answer in a matter of seconds.

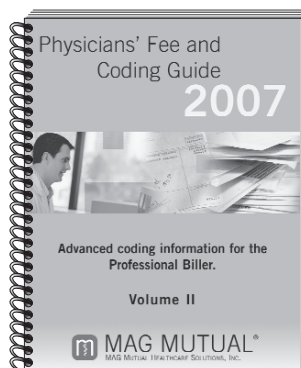
Speaking of charts, another great quality of the system is that we no longer have to worry about missing

fee and coding references that help you get paid.

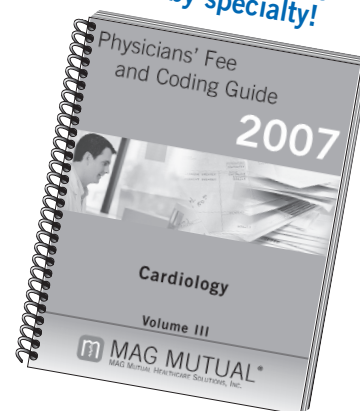
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files. With electronic files, we eliminate the problem of multiple people needing a file all at once. We can finish making notes on patients' charts while the front desk is scheduling the next appointment and another staff member is figuring out payment—all at the same time.

Taking It to the Next Level

After seeing our patients' enthusiastic response to the new technology, we decided to take it a step further and implemented online patient portals. It did not take long for our patients to take advantage of Web access to our staff. At Wilson Family Medicine, we utilize two patient portals which are data secure and HIPAA compliant: our HealthMatics Access® patient portal interfaces directly with the EMR component of HealthMatics Office. Patients can request prescription refills, review lab results, schedule appointments, and leave messages for us. Those messages pop up automatically on our desktop. Urgent messages are in red to alert us that an immediate response is needed, and we are able to get back to our patients much faster.

We use a second patient portal through RelayHealth where we conduct virtual "Web visits," online consultations for non-urgent health-care matters. This is a great tool to give our patients access to inquire about various problems and keep us informed on their progress. It allows us to keep in contact with our patients without having to schedule an in-office visit and more payers are reimbursing for Web visits.

Even though the portals are an electronic means of communication, we've found that they have brought us closer to our patients. For example, a patient may send us an e-mail about their chronic depression. We can ask them to give us an update within a set amount of time, and they will comply. Patients often feel there are too many layers to reach their physician; it's like peeling layers of an onion. With the

portals, they feel they have more direct access to their doctor, which creates a stronger bond and allows us to make healthcare decisions based on honest information.

Simplifying Complex Health Issues

While all of our patients have benefited from healthcare technology, certain patient groups, especially those with complex or multiple health issues, have seen the greatest improvements in care. Take, for instance, a patient with diabetes. With the EMR, we can track trends in their Hemoglobin A1Cs in a matter of moments. Before, we would have to manually look back through our paper records and compare. That would take hours, and we never were sure that we had the most up-to-date data. The EMR also monitors for potential drug interactions and instantly alerts us, which is especially important in treating an older patient population, who tend to be on multiple medications. We can pull educational materials on their disease through the system and print them out to send home with patients, and an electronic record of the information goes automatically into their file. If the patient needs to see an endocrinologist, we can immediately send the specialist the patient's latest test results and medical records, even those done that day.

The EMR also has proven beneficial in handling certain healthcare crises. For example, when Vioxx was pulled off the market, we were able to run a report to capture all patients who had used Vioxx. By noon that day, we had called those patients and informed them to stop taking the medication. In the paper world, this would have been extremely time-consuming or impossible.

In today's pay for performance environment, which grades physicians on how they take care of a certain population of patients under set criteria, we are able to better monitor our progress to ensure that we meet these

guidelines. We also have a concise way of reporting that information, whether it is to insurance carriers, CMS, or other regulatory institutions.

Improving Satisfaction

Without a doubt, we believe the relationships with our patients have improved due to technology. Our Blue Cross HMO ratings have improved with a greater level of patient satisfaction. In the past, we would have complaints such as, "I called the office and no one called me back," or, "It took too long to schedule my follow-up appointment." However, the new system helps us run a more efficient office which allows things to get done in a timelier manner. Perhaps the greatest benefit is that it allows us more face-time with our patients; which is by far the most important part of what we do.

The Future of Healthcare Technology

There's no doubt that technology will continue to improve patient care and play an even greater role in medicine. The trend in our industry is moving towards personal health records, and our EMR system is helping us stay on the forefront of this new era in health care. However, we can never expect it to replace our role as care providers and the responsibility we have to our patients. When the technology is embraced by the entire practice, from physicians to nurses to billing, the results are tremendous. We are better able to practice medicine and cultivate lasting relationships with our patients. At Wilson Family Medicine, the combination has led to a more successful practice, but even more importantly, it allows us to practice medicine the way we always envisioned.

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