

AUGUST 2015

Electronic health records have the power to transform sleep practices when used to their full potential. This sleep resource is designed to be used in connection with your electronic health record to help you more systematically improve patient care. Whether you are converting from an existing EHR system to a new one, or implementing EHR for the first time, there are a number of important things to keep in mind when selecting and working with an EHR vendor.

Research

If your sleep practice is part of a larger health system, the research phase will likely be conducted by management and IT representatives. Regardless, you should conduct your own research on the EHR system, keeping in mind how the EHR will impact the sleep practice specifically.

- Research the vendor's history and customer experience. One option for this type of review is KLAS (www.klasresearch.com). KLAS provides a free database of performance information on EHR vendors.
- Confirm that the EHR vendor is certified for the CMS Meaningful Use program. One of the motivating factors for the transition to EHR is the CMS Meaningful Use program. Providers who do not participate are financially penalized. Therefore, it is important to confirm that your vendor complies with CMS requirements and is certified. The Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology maintains a list of certified health IT products (<http://onchpl.force.com/ehrcert>).
- Consider whether or not the EHR

includes a practice management system or can work with your existing practice management system. Some EHRs include a practice management component, which includes scheduling and billing tools. Based on your needs you will need to determine whether you are looking to maintain your current practice management system (and want an EHR that will integrate with it) or whether you are looking for an EHR vendor that offers both EHR and practice management in one tool.

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Initial Discussions with Vendors

Prior to negotiating a contract, it is important to conduct some initial conversations with vendors to get a level of information that might not be available through online research. Develop a list of questions, which may include the following:

- Determine how customizable the EHR templates are and whether they can be modified to suit the sleep practice needs. Many EHR providers offer standard templates for primary care and certain specialties that crossover with sleep such as neurology or otolaryngology. Work with your vendor to determine if this level of customization is available and at what cost. Depending on the estimated cost, customization of the EHR templates may not provide a reasonable return on investment.
- Determine what level of interoperability

the EHR will have with referral sources. Depending on your practice, you may rely on referral paperwork from a number of different sources. It will be important to know what EHR systems are used by your referral sources and whether or not seamless referral data can be shared between their systems and yours. For sleep centers that are separate from the physician office, it is equally important to determine the level of interoperability between these two components of your sleep program. An EHR should ideally be able to seamlessly share health record information between the physician office and the sleep center.

- Determine what level of customer service and technology support you will receive from the company after implementation. Service and support are typically built into a contract for a fee. However, it is important to determine how much support you will be entitled to. Your vendor support needs may vary based on how much internal IT support you already have. Also determine how much onsite support you will receive during the EHR implementation.
- Obtain staff feedback. Different staff requires different things from an EHR system. If possible, be sure to include scheduling, billing, nursing and physician staff in the initial conversations about EHR vendor selection. Understanding the EHR needs of your staff will save a lot of potential headaches down the road.

Contract Review

Once you select an EHR vendor you will need

to review your contract in detail. It is always recommended that you consult a legal opinion on a contract you are uncomfortable with. Some EHR-specific issues to consider include:

- Review your vendor agreement for data ownership information. You should always own the patient data you enter into the EHR system.
- Determine and negotiate any upgrade or maintenance fees. Maintenance and support fees are standard – it is highly unlikely that you will be able to negotiate for free maintenance and support. But it is possible to negotiate discounts on these services.

During and After Implementation

It is important to take advantage of the resources and upgrades available through your EHR vendor.

- Become aware of your vendor's upgrade/maintenance schedule. Typically vendors will offer regularly scheduled maintenance as well as more significant upgrades. For example, an upgrade to accommodate ICD-10 is more significant and wouldn't fit into a standard maintenance schedule. It is important to identify staff that will monitor when these upgrades take place. In a larger system, this will likely be handled through your IT department. But it is important to be aware of the IT department's schedule so that patient scheduling accommodations can be made where necessary. Some vendors offer email listservs which you can subscribe to for notifications about upgrades and maintenance.

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- If educational sessions or conferences are available, attend them. Educational sessions are also a great resource when new staff is added to your practice. Training through your vendor can save staff time. Alternatively, some EHR vendors offer a “train the trainer” type educational session which creates experts out of one or more center staff members. Select staff is provided with more extensive training so that they can fill the role of trainer in your practice. Educational sessions are also a good time to network with other system users who may share more practical tips.