

Oncology-Specific EMRs Gain Traction: Suppliers Weigh In

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The jury is still out on how electronic medical records (EMR) technology will change the way healthcare is delivered, and how EMR adoption by physician practices will impact insurer contracts, flow of information, quality measures, and patient outcomes. What is known is that the development and implementation of EMR systems into oncology practices is one of utmost importance to all oncology stakeholders.

While the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology is defining “meaningful use” criteria for “qualified” EMR systems, and with the Federal government’s American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) providing financial incentives for practices that purchase a qualified system, the companies that are providing the latest in EMR technology are strategically making plans as they anticipate an increase in business over the next few years among community-based oncology practices.

Overall Benefits of an EMR

Having a paperless practice does away with the need for patient hard copy, and also allows for the ability to make treatment decisions at any time during a patient’s disease management. Although current EMRs

offer an array of clinical capabilities for the general practitioner, for the oncologist, “a useful EMR assists the physician in wading through treatment options culminating in the selection of the best regimen,” says James R. Smith, vice president of marketing at ION, a business unit of AmerisourceBergen Specialty Group.

This is done through a process that takes oncologists through several key interactive steps in which patient information is entered, treatment pathways for individual disease types are offered, dosing is calculated, possible interactions and adverse events are reported, and supportive journal articles are provided. Later in the process, oncologists are alerted when lab results are available, drugs are recalled, and when initial outcomes data on their patients emerge, at which point treatments can be reconsidered or augmented. Financial components of these systems assure proper billing and approval of therapies. Importantly, all information is provided at one source and is accessible to all approved staff members and to relevant outside parties.

When Purchasing an EMR...

Oncology practices that do not have an EMR system in place, but

are thinking of purchasing one in the near future need to research all the available options that are out there in order to find the right system that meets their practice’s needs.

Importantly, meaningful use criteria are being developed and oncology practices need to know if their vendor is compliant with the National Coordinator’s specifications, and what course of action they can take if the specifications are not met.

If an EMR is already in place, those practices need to discuss the incentives of ARRA with their vendor, and find out the vendor’s plans for attaining certification, when that certification is expected, and what course of action is available if meaningful use criteria are not met.

As a potential purchaser, there are a variety of oncology-specific EMR options available with each vendor offering different features and benefits with their system. It is beneficial to discuss with colleagues and other oncology groups already using EMRs needs, goals, and expectations of an oncology-specific system. Once those have been identified, the purchaser needs to research the different EMR options available.

Voices From the Field

As evidenced by the recent news of the Altos Solutions and Oncology Metrics merger, the combined companies are recognizing the potential for steady revenue from oncologists for the OncoEMR system. According to market research provided to us by Oncology Metrics, the desire to implement an oncology-specific system is high among those practices that don't currently have one, and the government-sponsored initiative ARRA is likely advancing the adoption of a certified system. With an expected increase in sales growth in the use of EMR systems specifically geared toward the oncology practice, the merger provides Altos with additional management, sales, and marketing bench strength, and at the same time provides Oncology Metrics with expanded marketing opportunities by tapping into Altos's growing customer base.

Most EMR vendors would acknowledge that the true competitor within their market share is the oncology office without an EMR. "Currently in the community oncology arena, less than 10 percent or so of practices have a viable EMR system," said Robert S. Hauser, PharmD, PhD, director of operations and informatics at ION. "One of the barriers," he said, "has been the high cost of implementing these systems." Even though cost may be an issue, especially for the one and two person oncology practice, nonetheless "almost all oncologists will be on an EMR of some form or another within the coming decade," noted Mark A. Sitarik, MD, a medical director at US Oncology.

Signaling this market trend, US Oncology recently announced that they have entered the open market with iKnowMed, the electronic health record (EHR) solution developed in 1996 and acquired by the company in 2004. Cindy Chavez, vice president iKnowMed said, "We are seeing a lot of interest from potential customers." iKnowMed is an oncology-specific system that is designed for oncologists by oncologists and is used by over 900 providers. By entering the open market, Chavez expects "an even greater surge of interest once ARRA qualifications are defined around what is required of an EHR to be certified in the oncology specialty." She points out that although iKnowMed's focus is on community-based medical oncology practices, "[we] can also be a solution for oncology departments within multi-specialty clinics."

At Varian Medical Systems, "There's no question about it," says Maureen Thompson, senior director of oncology information systems. "We are certainly anticipating an increase in business." Varian is a leading manufacturer of medical devices for treating cancer; they also develop software for managing the delivery of treatment, and the company has an oncology-specific EMR system called the ARIA information system. According to Thompson, "We are doing everything we can and are working with various stakeholders to ensure that the specific needs of oncology are taken into consideration as the criteria for 'meaningful use' are being established for oncology practices." Thompson thinks that the increase in business for any oncology-specific EMR vendor is dependent on meeting these crite-

ria. "And," she adds, "it is imperative that oncology practices implement an EMR system that supports oncology-specific features."

Making the decision to purchase an EMR is just the first step towards adopting one of these systems. With over 2,500 installations worldwide using the Elekta Impac Software, Dave Eggert, medical oncology business marketing manager for the company says, "System functionality is only one factor in the decision-making process. Potential EMR purchasers need to consider what companies will be around in the future to support their EMR choice, and what are the core competencies of the company, length of time in business, and financial strength." According to Eggert, Elekta Impac, too, has seen an increase in interest from practices looking to implement a system whose focus is on oncology and on meeting the IT needs of oncology providers.

Enhancing Cancer Care Delivery

It is becoming apparent that the number of oncology practices searching out an EMR system is increasing. Additionally, the National Cancer Institute is spearheading an initiative to interconnect oncology practices across the United States to increase clinical trial activity. The digital age is all around us and the question for oncology practices now becomes, not if, but when will they purchase a system, and how will they optimize the chosen system. All oncology stakeholders are affected by the increasing desire to implement an EMR which is providing opportunities for partnering to enhance the delivery of cancer care. ■■