

Going paperless

Ready for an electronic system?

Two thriving practices share the dos and don'ts of successfully converting your practice

The five doctors at Eye Care Center in Minneapolis-St. Paul were motivated to acquire an electronic practice management system and companion electronic health records (EHR) system several years ago. Their impetus was—quite simply—the thought of each patient chart passing from employee to employee all day, only to be filed away in storage areas already crowded with 30 years' worth of paperwork.

The investment has paid off in many ways, according to Mitchell H. Albers, OD, a partner in the practice. Easy and quick access to electronic files has been one of the primary benefits.



Dr. Albers

“The ability to access a chart from any location in the office is a big advantage,” Dr. Albers said. “Even in a small office, three or

four departments will have to touch each chart throughout the day. There is a significant time savings with an electronic system.”

Similarly, an ophthalmology and optometry practice in Dallas with six doctors has made significant gains in efficiency and slashed printing costs by one-third by adopting electronic systems.

“I'm finding more and more ways to make our practice more efficient and save costs on the practice side,” said Debbie Weiss, office administrator, Dallas Eye Care Associates. “EHR made me think outside the box, rethink the en-



Weiss

Take-Home Message

Switching to an electronic practice management system may not be easy. However, the benefits for doctors, staff members, and patients are plentiful. Representatives from two practices that successfully made the switch offer tips and encouragement.

tire practice, and look for ways we could do it differently instead of the cookie-cutter way we've always done it.”

Reaping the rewards

Eye Care Center and Dallas Eye Care Associates both purchased practice management and electronic health records systems from Compulink Business Systems, Westlake Village, CA. Weiss and Dr. Albers related how the systems' functions have been applied to maximize the benefits to their respective practices.

One of the reported key benefits of the new systems is improved accuracy. “Our electronic system has helped improve the accuracy and thoroughness of our documentation,” Dr. Albers said. He explained that, when completing records on paper, it is easy to overlook a box that needs to be filled in, while the electronic system will flag any missing information and ask if it should be documented.

Improved customer service is another payoff. “When a patient calls with a concern,” Dr. Albers continued, “the staff and doctors can immediately access the patient's record from any computer or location and address their questions more rapidly.”

Accessibility is also helpful when doctors are on call because they can get into the system from remote locations. They

simply log on to the patient's record and review the charts. Then, the doctors can add any pertinent notes in case another doctor in the practice sees the patient the next morning.

Weiss said Dallas Eye Care Associates made its choice because the software was designed specifically for eye-care practices. She noted that communication between the practice's two locations has also been streamlined since the adoption of EHR and

‘We're all going to have to implement electronic medical records at some point, so the sooner you embrace it, the sooner you can move on to conquering the next challenge in your practice.’

Mitchell H. Albers, OD

practice management systems. The doctors value the ability to pull up records electronically rather than waiting for a fax from the other office or having the chart sent up from a file storage area—saving time as well as the cost of faxing.

Electronic systems also enhance patient

relations. “We’re a larger clinic,” Dr. Albers said, “so it’s been a challenge as we’ve grown to maintain the personal touch. We can do simple things such as take pictures of the patient with the interfaced web camera and implement that in their chart. Then when patients come in for an appointment, the receptionist can address them by name.”

The system has also helped the practice maintain adequate inventory levels of contact lenses, frames, and lenses. “We dispense a significant percentage of all product types out of stock, and the reporting tools used by the staff make certain that we have those products available,” Dr. Albers said. He added that the streamlined inventory management system has

also tamed the dreaded year-end inventory, converting it from a long, arduous process to a much simpler, quicker, and more accurate task.

Learning curve

Both Weiss and Dr. Albers reported a 6-month to 1-year initiation period to understand and fully utilize the functionality of the software, a period that will have its share of ups and downs as staff members adjust to the system.

Based on her experiences with the installation of the two systems, Weiss recommended that practices start with a practice management system, then add electronic health records—and have lots of patience.

Dr. Albers urged colleagues to kick the paper habit. “We’re all going to have to implement electronic medical records at some point, so the sooner you embrace it, the sooner you can move on to conquering the next challenge in your practice.” **OP**

FYI

Mitchell H. Albers, OD

Phone: 651/777-3555

E-mail: Mitch.Albers@eyecarecenters.net

Debbie Weiss

Phone: 214/692-6220

E-mail: decaeye@aol.com

Neither Dr. Albers nor Ms. Weiss indicated a financial interest in the subject.