FREE ELECTRONIC MEDICAL RECORDS

Many small clinics have not switched over to electronic medical records (EMRs) or practice management software (PMS) because the cost is prohibitive. There is, however, a growing market of free EMRs, which may make switching from a paper-based system more attainable. Free EMRs must recover revenue and do that in several different ways. Some advertise to users or sell de-identified, aggregate data, while others charge a monthly fee for the PMS. This tool provides a list of available free EMRs and considerations for selecting one that fits a clinic's needs.

As clinics move to billing third-party payers, electronic medical records (EMRs) and the associated practice management software (PMS) can make documentation easier and automate billing.[1] However, EMRs and PMS can be prohibitively expensive for small clinics (including health department ones) that provide publicly funded STD services. One way to reduce costs may be to choose a "free" EMR.

Free EMRs have different revenue-generating models. Some charge for the associated PMS and/or a percentage of claims billed, while others generate revenue by advertising or selling aggregated data to other parties. Before selecting a free EMR, it is important to research its data security policies to understand how the practice and client data are used.[2]

Electronic Medical Record (EMR): A paperless, computerized medical system in which patients' data are stored, retrieved, and modified.[3] Clinicians and other authorized personnel may read and enter patient data.

Practice Management Software (PMS): Software that maintains the data and operations necessary to running a health care organization. PMS provides the tools for scheduling, health data management (demographics and insurance information), billing, and reporting. It often accompanies an betrig EMR and takes over administrative tasks not covered by the EMR.[4]

THINGS TO CONSIDER IN CHOOSING AN EMR FOR STD SERVICES

- **HIPAA compliance[3]:** Are data stored according to HIPAA standards?

- **Privacy:** How are the stored data utilized by the vendor?[4]

- **Structured vs Unstructured Data:** Are the data stored as text or can they be aggregated across patients?

- **Clinical Documentation Needs:** What fields does the clinic need for documentation, follow-up, referrals, and quality assurance?

- **Reporting Requirements:** Can data be exported in the correct format for funders?

- **Practice Management Software:** What are the functions and cost of the PMS?

- **Upfront and monthly costs:** What are the upfront and monthly costs associated with maintaining the EMR and/or PMS? Are there other costs (e.g., for features tailored to your practice)?

- **Upgrades and new features:** How often can you expect upgrades and new features to be added?

- **Relationship with the vendor:** Will they be flexible and assist you to meet your health information technology needs?

- **Sharing:** Can the EMR/PMS system be shared with other programs within the clinic or health department?

- **Maintenance:** Where are the EMR and PMS housed? Are these systems cloud-based or does the clinic need to maintain the programs on its own servers? Does the clinic have the resources to maintain the hardware necessary to run these programs? For example, computers in each exam room or laptop/tablets for each provider and support staff member.

Some Available Free EMRs

Please note: STD TAC **does not endorse** any of these products. Each has pros and cons that may (or may not) meet your health information technology goals or be suitable for your clinic.

There are several free options for EMRs. Most of these, however, do not have the PMS component integrated into the free product. The PMS may be added on for a fee. You are not required to select the EMR and PMS from the same vendor. Before contracting with different vendors, make sure the PMS can integrate with the EMR.

- Open EMR: **www.open-emr.org**

- Open MRS: **www.openmrs.org**

- Practice Fusion: **www.practicefusion.com**

- Medgen: **www.medgenehr.com**

- Kareo: **www.kareo.com**

- E-Clinical Works: **www.eclinicalworks.com**

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1   The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. What Do Electronic Health Records Mean for Our Practice? http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/csi/ehrkit-brochure.pdf

2   Hipp, Elizabeth. The Hidden Cost of Free EMR Systems. September 21, 2013. http://www.kevinmd.com/blog/2013/09/hidden-cost-free-emr-systems.html

3   U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Ofice for Civil Rights. Privacy, Security, and Electronic Health Records. http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/privacy/hipaa/understanding/consumers/privacy-security-electronic-records.pdf

4   Hipp, Elizabeth. The Hidden Cost of Free EMR Systems. September 21, 2013. http://www.kevinmd.com/blog/2013/09/hidden-cost-free-emr-systems.html