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Physician practices need help navigating the EHR Gold Rush

March 12, 2010 | Scott Everson

The current quest of physician practices to purchase electronic health record solutions is reminiscent of the California gold rush of the 1850s. Practices are rushing to claim their share of the government stimulus funding, while more vendors than ever are in the market place offering EHR solutions.

Not all EHR vendors are merely trying to stake their claim on the stimulus funding. There are many good EHR solutions on the market -- even some of the new ones. However, with hundreds of solutions to pick from, selecting an EHR is a daunting decision. Who can you trust? How do you determine which EHR solution is right for your practice? Which EHR will enable your practice to achieve the meaningful use criteria to qualify for the full \$48,000 in stimulus funding that is available under the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act within the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act?

For practices that are finding it difficult to determine which EHR is right for their practice, a trusted source to help with the decision may be closer than they realize. Physician practices may find a potential EHR resource in an existing and trusted business partner -- their third-party medical billing service. After all, practices already trust their billing companies with one of their most vital assets -- their cash. Third-party billing companies have a vested interest in maximizing practice operations because they are paid on a percentage of a practice's revenues. The long-term relationships that third-party billing companies have with their physician practice clients allow them to gain an in-depth understanding of the clinical documentation that is required to support billing, which is valuable knowledge to tap into during the EHR selection process.

Smaller and mid-sized practices rarely have the staffing resources to dedicate to EHR system selection. Medical billing companies can help fill this gap by doing the legwork necessary to narrow the field of potential EHR solutions. In fact, many billing companies also offer EHR implementation, configuration, training and ongoing support to physicians practices, which can help improve the chances of successful EHR implementation and adoption. This high level of support is a natural extension of the long-term relationship that exists between the two entities.

In addition, billing companies are well suited to evaluate the technical aspects of an EHR, since they are proficient in maintaining complex practice management systems and other information technology, such as patient databases, appointment scheduling, and various reporting needs. Moreover, billing companies can determine if the selected EHR can exchange information (e.g., patient demographics, billing information, electronic prescribing, etc.) with the outsourced solutions that it manages, which can reduce administrative tasks for the practice. Further operational efficiencies within the practice can be optimized by partnering with the billing company to streamline processes that are related to information input and exchange between the two systems.

Through the experience gained by working with many practices, billing companies can guide physicians in their use of EHRs so that they can meet meaningful use criteria and qualify for HITECH/ARRA stimulus funding. Some billing companies are even offering to help practices complete their applications for the stimulus funding.

The EHR gold rush is here, and practices have more choices than ever among the hundreds of EHRs being offered. Having a trusted partner to help make the right EHR decision is truly an asset. Practices should be encouraged to approach their medical billing companies to learn what EHR selection resources they offer, and consider engaging them to streamline the process and increase the chances of successful EHR implementation and usage.

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