

Peer Perspectives on Electronic Prescribing: Automating the prescribing process brings demonstrable payback



SITUATION

In April 2005, Deep River Family Health became the first of the many medical practices within the Cornerstone Healthcare Group (a large, multi-group corporation with more than 150 providers) to implement the TouchWorks® electronic medical record (EMR) system from AllScripts.

"We needed a system to be able to easily communicate and share patient records within our group, and from office to office and community to community," says Dr. Samuel Kelly.

And, the practice "was looking to reduce errors and confusion associated with handwritten prescriptions, expedite the overall prescription-management process, and benefit

our patients by saving them unnecessary trips to the pharmacy," says Dr. Samuel Kelly.

Such capabilities were confirmed with the knowledge that TouchWorks was certified to provide computer-to-computer connectivity with the vast majority of U.S. community pharmacies through the Pharmacy Health Information Exchange™, a secure network operated by SureScripts®.

IMPLEMENTATION

At first several of the prescribers in the practice who are not generally comfortable with computers were reluctant about making the switch from paper-based prescribing processes to the newer, automated EMR approach. "The truth is, no matter how comfortable you are with technology, any forced change in your workflow processes will always create some discomfort and some challenges in the beginning," says Dr. Kelly. He adds: "But if you really want to save time and improve safety and patient satisfaction, you've just got to get over your reluctance, and jump in to make the change."

RESULTS

Prior to the upgrade, writing a new prescription used to involve multiple, error-prone steps, says Dr. Kelly. For

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



**Samuel
Kelly, M.D.**

- In practice for 10 years (High Point, N.C.)
- Practice Size: 3 physicians, 1 full-time and 1 part-time physician's assistants (PAs), 21 clinical and clerical staff
- Technology Provider & Solution: Allscripts, TouchWorks EMR
- Avg. Weekly Rx Volume: 200 New Rx/doctor, several hundred refills/practice
- Rx Time Savings: Cut from 10% of total work hours to approximately 5%. Refill authorization time cut from as much as 90 minutes to 15 minutes or less.

instance, for new prescriptions, the doctor would write all the details on his pad, and then dictate all of the details associated with that prescription into a recording device, so the information could eventually be entered in two places within the patient's chart (both as a daily note, and as part of the patient's long-term medication record).

"Any time you need to put such detailed handwritten information in three separate places, you increase the risk of error," says Dr. Kelly.

Using the new e-prescribing system, the prescribers in Dr. Kelly's office now generate all new prescriptions right from their laptop computers, and all of the salient information is automatically noted in all of the right places within the patient record — thereby eliminating the risk of transcription errors, he says.

"It didn't take long for us to all recognize that this new approach is just an inherently better way,"

— Dr. Kelly

As for prescription refills, in the old days, whenever a fax or a phone call would come in from patients, their family members, or a pharmacy, "people in our office would invariably be running around trying to find the chart and attach the note, so they could then chase down the doctor to seek his or her review and approval," says Dr. Kelly.

And for staff, the need to phone in hundreds of prescriptions each week, and provide clarifications to the pharmacy when hand-written prescriptions were unclear, "was a hugely cumbersome and very frustrating process," says Sharon Combs, LPN, the clinical supervisor in Dr. Kelly's practice. "You'd always get put on hold, or leave a voice message that you were never sure would actually ever be heard."

Meanwhile, because the office now enjoys transparent connectivity with most of the area pharmacies, Dr. Kelly and his colleagues are pleased to see that an increasing number of refill requests are being submitted by the pharmacy (at the patient's request) in electronic format. When refill requests are submitted in this way, they show up as a "task" on the physician's laptop computer, and the message includes all of the relevant patient and prescription information (including dosing, number of refills and instructions).

This enables the doctor to easily evaluate the request, and submit the prescription refill back to the pharmacy electronically. This eliminates the need to involve staff — and have them pull paper charts and wait for doctor approvals — altogether, says Dr. Kelly.

"All of this electronic documentation makes the whole process much more streamlined and transparent for everyone involved," says Dr. Kelly. "And, if any specific questions do come up, it's much easier for anyone in the office to follow the 'electronic paper trail' from start to finish."

"The whole refill process, from start to finish, is now handled in just minutes," says Combs. "While it was stressful to learn the new systems and overhaul all of our workflow processes, all of our physicians and support staff are much happier now. We never thought we'd say this, but we love it."

Benefits for all stakeholders

The use of e-prescribing has led to several noteworthy improvements for Kelly and his colleagues. "Now that our staff is spending so much less time hunting for and managing paper files, they're much more able to stay on top of their workloads in other areas," says Dr. Kelly. This has provided

BEST PRACTICES

- **Conquer your fear.** "Even though it was a bit uncomfortable and there was a learning curve associated with automating a lot of these tasks, we're completely satisfied with our EMR and e-prescribing system," says Dr. Kelly. "We're at the point now where it feels easier to do this than to take out a prescription pad and do it the old way."
- **Get portable:** Combining the use of a PDA with desktop PCs allows prescribers and staff to have optimum flexibility in managing prescribing tasks and communicating with patients about their medication therapies.

demonstrable payback: Since implementing the e-prescribing system, the practice has been able to reduce time spent on refill management process cut from 10% of total work hours to approximately 5%.

In addition, clinical supervisor Combs says: "Because all of the information contained in the electronic prescription is clear and concise, we don't get nearly as many callbacks from pharmacists as we used to, to decipher illegible or confusing information on handwritten prescriptions. That's good for the pharmacy and good for us, and it speeds the whole refill-fulfillment process for the patient."

Meanwhile, when it comes to patient safety and security, Dr. Kelly says the new system beats the old approach hands down. "When I bring my laptop into the examination room with me, there's no chance for miscommunication with the patient about the medications being prescribed, the pharmacy they want to use, the dosing instructions, or the number of refills."

"We've been surprised by how satisfied our patients are — and how vocal they've been about it," says Dr. Kelly. "We had our own reasons for doing this, but we've been really happy to see how pleased our patients are, too."