



paperless

Planet-friendly patient medical records

BY WILLIAM E. MARDEN

Who hasn't been to a physician's office and seen row after row of endless accountability in patient files?

You ask yourself, "Isn't there a better, more planet-friendly and efficient way for your physician to document and record all those patient medical records?"

Well, as a matter of fact, there is.

The paperless doctor's office as well as a few local hospitals are not only saving medical practices tons of money, but according to staff and physicians involved, is making medicine more efficient and safer for patients.

Thanks to the advances in technology, the next time you visit your physician, he or she may not be carrying your patient file in with them, but rather a portable laptop computer with all the necessary information.

Aylin Ozdemir, M.D., a pediatrician with Pediatric Associates of Jacksonville, a thriving group practice with satellite offices around Jacksonville, converted to a paperless operation last July after more than a year of study and preparation. She is a strong proponent of the new system generically called Electronic Medical Records (EMR).

For physicians in her group, a new patient's information is taken by office staff and typed directly into the office computer system. The information is then immediately available to nurses and



Aylin Ozdemir, M.D., brings along her laptop with up-to-date patient records during a young patient's checkup.



Left: According to Ozdemir, electronic medical records cuts down on overhead and increases efficiency.

physicians throughout the groups' various offices. As a doctor examines a young patient, their findings are typed directly onto laptop computers and added to the patient's files. Files of existing patients before the July electronic conversion, are scanned in with new information added directly into the computer.

All the medical records are backed up by the group's two computer servers during the night, in the event one crashes. The information is put onto a data tape, placed into a fire-proof safe and the

sent over the Internet to a storage site the next day. Paper records are stored in an air-conditioned site where by Florida law, they are required to be kept for a certain number of years.

"This system not only cuts down on overhead, but it increases efficiency and prevents errors," said Ozdemir. "Plus, our system includes a checks and balances geared specifically to our needs, i.e., it includes all standard pediatric guidelines as well as other integral methodologies to help us better serve our patients."

According to Ozdemir, while all new records and findings are put into the computer system, scanners will continue to be needed because her practice will not be fully paperless for some time.

"This is a huge undertaking," said

Stephen Clark, M.D., of Family Practice Associates, says the high-tech electronic system allows him to dedicate more time to his patients' needs.



Ozdemir. "We can't control the pharmacies sending us paper prescriptions and specialists sending us reports on paper," she said. "We'll still have to scan those into the system."

Since October 2004, Family Practice Associates of Jacksonville has gone paperless, no longer using paper charts to document patient records.

"We no longer use paper charts," said Suzanne MacEwan. "We see quite a few patients several times a month for chronic conditions. If there's anything we need from old paper records, we're able to scan them into the electronic record and input patient history as we see the patient, building their electronic chart."

"Our medically complex patients with multiple medicines are handled easily by the electronic records," said Stephen Clark, M.D., of Family Practice Associates. "This allows doctors more time to dedicate to the patients' needs instead of pushing paper. We saw a result of savings on efficiency and a return in investment, but the real value has been improved patient care."

As a newly created practice, NexStep Integrated Pain Center had the advantage of starting out paperless. According to Terri Sanchez, office manager for NexStep, patients are asked to input their own data onto bubble sheets similar to filling out an SAT test. The sheets are then scanned into the computer. The physicians in this practice use a voice-activated system with microphones that allow them to dictate directly into their computers. "It puts their words onto the screen and they can correct as they say

it," said Sanchez.

Private practice physicians are not the only ones cutting out paper files, many local hospitals have begun or are in the process of going paperless as well.

In February 2005, Baptist Medical Center South opened its doors as the area's newest paperless health care facility, electronically documenting all patient files. Last July, Baptist Medical Center

Nassau spent \$1.4 million transitioning to a paperless operation, with plans for all of Baptist Medical Center campuses expecting to convert by the end of 2007 at a cost of approximately \$10 million.

Jim Mayo, administrator at Baptist Medical Center Nassau, said the benefits of going electronic or paperless far outweighs the costs.

"There is no opportunity to misunderstand an order or misread a note," said Mayo. "Because all records are on the computers, doctors may take laptops home and have the ability to access patient's records in the event of an emergency call. Everything moves faster so the patient gets the most effective intervention sooner."

Likewise, St. Luke's Hospital, operated by Mayo Clinic Jacksonville, is currently 60 to 70 percent paperless and is scheduled to be completely paperless by mid-2007.

Memorial Hospital Jacksonville has plans to begin a year-long renovation at the start of 2008 that will include a transition to a paperless system. **H**

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