Electronic Records: One Small Step for a Physician

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WASHINGTON — Physicians who are too nervous to completely convert their offices to electronic health records can start the process with a few "baby steps" to make it less intimidating, Dr. Daniel Sands said at a health care congress sponsored by the Wall Street Journal and CNBC.

Physicians are often reluctant to leap into an EHR system because of its complexity and the expense involved, said Dr. Sands, of Harvard University, Boston. "If you're a doctor, what do you do? How do you get that [EHR] if you can't take the one big leap?"

One way to start is by using electronic communications with patients and with office staff, he said. "Why don't you get rid of those stupid yellow Post-It notes you use for phone messages? A simple step like that is a good way to get people engaged with technology."

Electronic prescribing is another way to bridge the gap, said Dr. Sands, who is also chief medical officer of ZixCorp, a Newton, Mass., company that sells electronic prescribing software. Medications can be prescribed using various electronic devices, including desktop and laptop computers, handhelds, and even mobile phones. Since studies have shown that electronic prescribing can reduce medication errors substantially, "this should be the standard of care," he said.

Another baby step to take is by using online clinical reference materials, Dr. Sands continued. "We have lots of data showing that physicians are often faced with questions when taking care of patients, and they can't find the answers because they don't have time, so they just move on. And that's really scary."

Rather than looking for answers "in a book that's out of date as soon as it's printed, maybe looking online would be a great place to start," Dr. Sands said. ■