

Tips Can Ease Choice of Electronic Record System

With President Bush's mandated online EMR only 8 years away, it's not too early to start shopping.

BY ROXANNE NELSON
Contributing Writer

BOCA RATON, FLA. — The right electronic medical record software can supercharge efficiency, help cap costs, increase the bottom line, reduce medical errors, and provide better care, according to a talk given at the annual meeting of the Florida Society for Dermatology and Dermatologic Surgery.

Several products are available, although only a few are designed specifically for dermatology, said Daniel M. Siegel, M.D., professor of clinical dermatology at the State University of New York, Brooklyn.

"No system is perfect and nothing is ideal for everyone," he said. However, he reminded the audience that President Bush had set a 10-year goal of having a secure electronic medical record (EMR) that could be accessed online and would include patient medical histories and elec-



tronic prescribing, among other key attributes.

"So just remember, we are 8 years from mandated, required electronic health records," Dr. Siegel said. "It's going to happen."

An optimal system will allow quick access to information, is easy to learn and use, and is inexpensive. The ideal EMR will take advantage of the latest hardware, such as table PCs or PDAs, as well as high-speed networks. It will also allow multiple forms of input, including easily customized templates and speech recognition.

To simplify the process of choosing software from the array of choices that is currently available, Dr. Siegel offered the following suggestions:

► Avoid purchasing or signing a lengthy contract without first trying out the software. Visit other offices using the same system and convince the vendors to let you

try it out for a week or so, Dr. Siegel said.

► Think ease of use. "If, after a 5-, 10-, 30-, [or] 60-minute demo, you still think you need to get a PhD in computer science and astrophysics to use the program, you probably do," he said. "Don't buy a package whose demo gives you a migraine."

► Have a customized template. Many vendors are focused on primary care medicine and may have great demos in diabetes and hypertension but not in psoriasis or acne.

► Select a system that uses standard PC-compatible software. "This way, if you change dance partners, you can still reuse the dance hall," Dr. Siegel said.

► Do your research. "Ask them how long they've been in business."

► Dermatologists need to be sure that the program is HL7 compatible. HL7 is an information exchange standard for communications between medical applications. If the system requires an upgrade, the transformation should be as painless as

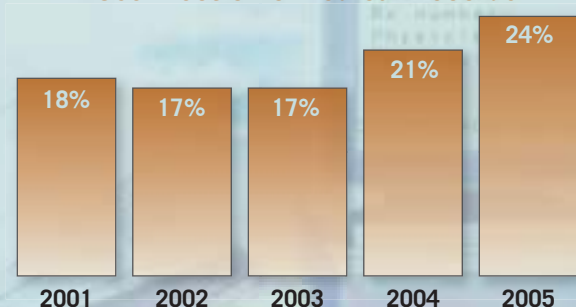
possible, and HL7 will help with that.

► Plan an exit strategy. Find out if you can drop the program if it's not working out, and if the information can be transferred, he said. "Alternatively, if you have a subscription to it, can you purchase it?"

Dr. Siegel added that when choosing EMR software, it is important to go slowly and to look for an inexpensive system that meets the needs of the practice. Ask about available demos and trialware, get any money-back guarantees in writing, and identify possible additional costs before purchase. ■

DATA WATCH

Less Than a Quarter of Office-Based Physicians Use Electronic Medical Records



Note: Based on an annual survey that included 1,281 physicians in 2005.
Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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Emil Bisaccia, M.D.
Clinical Professor

Columbia University College of Physicians & Surgeons
182 South Street
Morristown, NJ 07960
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Assistant Clinical Professor

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650 Shawan Falls Dr., Suite 105
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