Gulf Coast Health Center serves its community with a new EMR system

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By Michael Lorenzen

As a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC), Gulf Coast Health Center (GCHC) treats the underserved of southeast Texas. GCHC operates on very thin margins, reliant upon grants to keep the doors open. As such, the organization was focusing on value when evaluating electronic medical record (EMR) systems.

Yet GCHC wasn’t about to sacrifice functionality in its new technology and desired a solution that could be tailored to its unique requirements. Like many other organizations implementing an EMR, GCHC needed a system with inherent flexibility that would allow for upgrades and expansion of the system as necessary. The health center also wished to ensure that the transition to new software caused as little disruption as possible to users, that the system would fit within caregivers’ complex workflows, and that training and ongoing technical support would be easily available to all GCHC’s users.

In addition to its EMR, GCHC planned to update its aging practice management (PM) software. Not only did the organization require an EMR technology that would integrate with the PM system, but also would accommodate third-party software such as laboratory, pharmacy and radiology information systems as needed.

With these criteria and more in mind, GCHC began its search for a new software partner, evaluating a handful of leading developers. After a careful review of a variety of compatible technologies, the organization was drawn to Henry Schein’s MicroMD PM and EMR systems because they most closely met GCHC’s unique financial and clinical requirements.

During implementation, GCHC discovered it could save even more money by deploying the technology in a virtual terminal-server environment, which enabled the center to avoid purchasing expensive PCs in favor of thin-client desktop and laptop workstations. In a virtual environment all data is hosted on servers with access to the EMR provided to physicians and nurses via a remote desktop. This keeps all sensitive patient data in a secure location.

GCHC immediately began leveraging the system’s robust features, including analytical capabilities that track information that the health center utilizes to help improve clinical quality. For instance, the software allows the organization to conduct peer reviews and comparisons and develop reports on key clinical indicators and outcomes data, such as the percentage of patients with a particular chronic disease. GCHC can then leverage this information to address disparities among population groups. The system also provides GCHC with extensive reporting capabilities that aggregate patient data for the health center to deliver to oversight agencies.

The organization also soon realized the benefits of the technology, including the software’s ability to improve the accuracy of information through features such as medication interaction alerts – a valuable tool given the high number of GCHC’s patients that have multiple prescriptions. Additionally, the EMR facilitated an efficient conversion process of its paper-to-electronic charts across multiple locations. GCHC also reduced the average length of each patient encounter by 15 minutes due to the time saved through scanning in more than 60,000 paper charts. This allowed GCHC’s nursing staff to provide better information to providers and save valuable time filing and locating patient charts.

The organization plans to integrate the system with a third-party laboratory to facilitate electronic lab orders and results, alerting the provider of the available information for review. It will also interface with certain diagnostic equipment – such as blood pressure monitors – that will directly feed data into the EMR, increasing triage efficiency in particular.

GCHC owes its success to its strategic deployment, adaptation of best practices for integration, its effective process for digitizing paper records, a dedicated effort to gain staff support through effective communications and the implementation of an effective training program. GCHC also gained comfort in the fact that its EMR solution has positioned the organization to comply with near- and long-term meaningful-use requirements.