In our industry, we hear much about **INTEGRATION** in many different respects. Before I share my thoughts, I would like to frame the discussion. In this context, “integration” refers to **comprehensive connectivity** between multiple computers, and means any actions taken or changes made from any workstation are immediately updated or reflected in every other computer or module connected to the software.

The benefits of an integrated practice management system are unquestionable: information is shared instantly and is easy to access. This makes virtually every aspect of patient care smoother and more straightforward, and helps create an organized, professional environment.

Software integration provides you with helpful ways to connect to your patients. Some practice-management programs give you the option of using a reception area computer as a patient check-in station — a simple means for patients to enter their information and notify your team when they arrive. It’s a definite time-saver for your team.

A few practice-management programs allow patients to submit registration information over the Web from their home computers. This level of connectivity can help ensure more accurate answers from patients who may forget to bring some of the information they need (insurance records, prescriptions, etc.) to your office.

Integration also creates the option for doctors or office managers to connect from home computers. Most practice-management programs accommodate remote desktop programs (such as LogMeIn) that work pretty well.

A few practice-management programs have proprietary applications that let doctors connect via smartphone. These applications allow a flexible means of mobile connectivity and leverage smartphones’ intuitive navigation.

Integration raises important hardware considerations. If you have six or more computers in your practice, you really need to have a dedicated server to house all your practice data and distribute the workload to other workstations.

Your dedicated server should be a powerful computer since it will dictate the speed at which the networked computers will operate.

However, your other computers need not be the fastest or most powerful. Instead, choose machines that meet the needs of each workstation. For instance, your operatory computers should have high-end graphics cards because they will be processing a heavy volume of image data.

True practice integration requires abandoning paper charts, which of course raises the issue of data backup. It’s important that all the sensitive patient and financial data remain intact and protected. Many practices use onsite external hard drives. Some even assign a team member the task of manually backing up the files and keeping the backup drives at home or some other “safe” location for the weekend.

Remote offsite backup is a better option. If the primary data storage mode and its backup are stored onsite, both can be destroyed by the same catastrophic event (fire, flood, etc.). Removable storage devices can be stolen, creating the potential for HIPAA violations — a time-consuming nightmare that undermines patients’ trust.

Chances are no one at your practice is a data security expert, so why hang that sort of responsibility on them? Leave it to the professionals. There are a couple of good backup services out there that let you schedule automatic backups and easily restore data in the event of accidental loss.

A common issue for practices becoming chartless is what to do with existing paper files. Do not rush to scan all your charts. It’s a tremendous waste of time, money, memory, and manpower. Instead, simply scan individual documents as patients visit the office.

It’s understandable if you are a bit apprehensive about the many decisions associated with integrated practice management. I suggest you choose practice-management software from a company known for well-trained, responsive, courteous customer service. The company can help you troubleshoot any issues that arise. Remember: anything you do in the software, you can undo. You may have some initial hiccups, but integration is ultimately well worth it. DE

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