

Muir Medical IPA pitches electronic records to 700 doctors

BY MARIE-ANNE HOGARTH
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Adoption of electronic records has been slow among East Bay doctors in independent practice.

Muir Medical Group Independent Practice Association, like most networks of doctors, is trying to sell its 700 doctors on making the transition from paper to electronic records. Muir hopes free technical support it is offering through an outside company will seal the deal.

Also helping are changes in federal law and in Internal Revenue Service rules now making it possible for nonprofit hospitals to subsidize these systems.

"You are starting to see some movement and some hospitals are talking about it and starting to make inquiries," said

Donald Bouey, a Walnut Creek lawyer.

Muir Medical Group IPA, which represents family practice doctors and specialists, first launched in March a program provided through NextGen Healthcare Information Systems Inc. The company is offering electronic medical records, to keep track of clinical information and patient histories, and electronic practice management, to deal with scheduling, billing and administrative functions.

The transition to electronic records is increasingly important to physicians, who are required by government and private payers to provide ever-more-detailed information and demonstrate best practices when seeking reimbursement for services. Independent practice associations, like Muir Medical Group, represent doctors in contracts with insurers, so the

IPAs also have an interest in increasing adoption of electronic medical records among doctors.

So far, Muir says it has about 30 providers and their support staff that are active on the electronic practice management side and between six and eight that are active on the electronic medical records side – plus more in the wings.

"We have tried to work around the doctors, their practices and their abilities to make the transition," said Lynn Haegeland, CFO of Muir Medical Group IPA. "Not every practice operates the same way."

Although electronic medical records have made inroads into the offices of doctors practicing in foundations, which pay physicians set compensation, electronic records are not so common in indepen-

dent practice associations like Muir Medical Group IPA, which allow doctors to manage their own books of business.

Muir, Hill Physicians Medical Group Inc. and Alta Bates Medical Group all have offered doctors electronic medical records with varying degrees of success.

Alta Bates Medical Group, which provided its 600 physician members an option through NextGen last February, was disappointed not enough doctors signed up and is re-evaluating its strategy.

Hill Physicians counts 21 practices – representing 91 physicians and 40 mid-level practitioners – using electronic medical records. Overall, Hill represents 2,600 doctors operating in 1,300 practice locations.

"We offer the software at a highly subsidized price," said Craig Lanway of Hill Physicians Medical Group. But "the challenge with doctors is that the pricing is always an issue."

Hill is hoping to bring on 112 new doctors into the electronic age thanks to a new deal through Catholic Healthcare West offering the program at a discounted price of \$500 per physician a month, plus some hardware costs paid by the doctor.

That's approximately what Muir Medical Group IPA charges its physicians – officials there say – although they would not provide details.

Muir Medical Group IPA also hopes to make the difference by offering technical support through ITelagen LLC, a New Jersey company that provides a virtual help desk for businesses. The company, which started working first in the financial services industry, says it offers patent-pending artificial intelligence to remotely monitor a physician's computers and check for problems before they worsen.

"If the software detects a problem, it sets an alarm off in our office and we correct the problem," said John O'Keefe, managing director for ITelagen.

ITelagen says its services mean doctors don't need to hire IT support staff.

Dr. Mark Musco, with Diablo Family Physicians Inc., says the support of ITelagen and other consultants provided through Muir Medical Group IPA made a difference to the practice he runs with his wife, Dr. Dolores Musco, in San Ramon.

"The software runs better and the data is safer and we have more up days than we used to," said Mark Musco, 37, who initially launched an electronic medical record program on his own office computer servers. "I was spending thousands of dollars every month managing our servers, and at least 10 hours a week working with various vendors to make things happen. Now our monthly IT costs are half of what they used to be."

He says these time-consuming issues are the biggest hurdles for doctors. Meanwhile it remains to be seen if more hospital groups will step up to foot the bill of electronic medical records for doctors in independent practice.

Catholic Healthcare West, which is offering the subsidized software license to Hill doctors through Hill's management firm, Pri-Med Management Consulting Services, owns 25 percent of Pri-Med.

The regulatory changes allowing these deals to happen include a new exception to the Stark law, which governs physician referral for Medicare and Medicaid patients, as well as a new safe harbor from the federal anti-kickback law. Also the IRS has given hospitals the assurance that funding physician electronic records systems won't jeopardize their nonprofit status.

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