



Hospitals and Health Care Providers Switch to Electronic Records

BY MICHAEL LYNCH
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Doctors, hospitals and patients are now more connected than ever as the majority of health care providers in the United States are making the switch to electronic health records.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced recently that it already exceeded its goal for 50 percent of doctor's offices and 80 percent of eligible hospitals to use EHRs by the end of 2013.

According to a 2012 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey, 17 percent of physicians and 9 percent of hospitals were using EHRs in 2008.

Dr. Bruce Block, chief learning and medical informatics officer at the Pittsburgh Regional Health Initiative, said EHRs allow for a more personally engaging type of care.

"The information in the charts can be shared with patients directly through a patient portal so that they can see what's going on and participate in care, which of course is necessary for them to get better," Block said.

Block said EHRs allow doctors to enter information in one place and use it in a variety of ways, including basic health records and prescriptions, as well as appointment making.

Doctors, hospitals and other eligible health care providers that adopted EHRs received incentive payments through the Medicare and Medicaid EHR Incentive Programs. In Pennsylvania, about 19,000 providers received roughly \$700 million in payments since the programs began. More than 291,000 health care providers and over 3,800 hospitals across the United States have received these federal payments.

Block believes the majority of doctors and hospitals would not be switching to EHRs if it weren't for the Medicare and Medicaid payments. Block said the time and money it takes to install and train workers to use these records isn't worth it without the reimbursements.

Making the switch from paper records and filing cabinets to all electronic records does come with its own set of problems.

"There is a danger that you're picking things from lists and if you pick the wrong thing from the list and you don't read what you did, then you could harm somebody," Block said.

Despite the risks, Block says the EHRs add an extra level of security that paper records never had.

“Paper records are very insecure,” Block said. “Anybody in the office could go pull a chart from the chart rack and look up things and I would never know that it had happened, whereas with the electronic health records, anybody who logs on to the computer, there’s an auto-trail for everything they do.”