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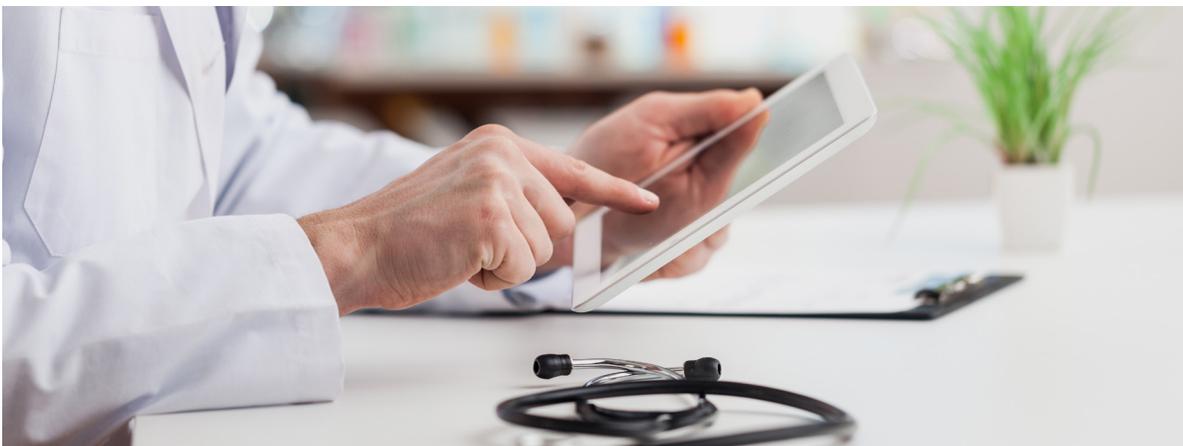
The Case for Electronic Health Records (EHRs) in Ambulatory Surgery Centers (ASCs)

A changing healthcare landscape has made the ROI on EHRs more compelling

Ambulatory surgery centers (ASCs) have been slow to adopt electronic health records (EHRs) compared to other healthcare providers.[1] There are a number of reasons for this. One reason is that ASCs were never part of the EHR Incentive Program (also known as meaningful use or MU) that Medicare rolled out in 2011, so ASCs weren't entitled to the federal payments that were available to other providers.

A second reason ASCs have been hesitant to adopt EHRs is that the dominant EHRs on the market have focused on inpatient providers. These EHRs – such as Epic and Cerner – are designed to support complex hospital enterprises. As such, they typically don't align well with the streamlined workflow that characterizes ASCs. These large-scale, enterprise solutions are often prohibitively expensive as well.

A third disincentive to EHR adoption is that calculating the return on investment (ROI) of implementing an EHR can be complicated. "If an ASC is going to purchase and implement an EHR, they need to know there are going to be benefits and cost savings that help offset the cost," said Tom Scott, Chief Financial Officer of HSTpathways.

EHRs and the changing healthcare landscape

Medicare's EHR Incentive Program has had a significant impact on the digitization of healthcare. EHR adoption across all hospitals has risen from less than 10 percent in 2008 to 96 percent in 2017.[2] How does this impact ASCs? The digitization of healthcare across the provider landscape has raised the expectations of clinicians and consumers.

- 78 percent of U.S. physicians have adopted certified EHRs[3]
- 80 percent of job-seeking nurses consider which EHR a provider is using when they are evaluating employment opportunities[4]
- 84 percent of healthcare consumers under the age of 40 said they seek the most technologically advanced and electronically communicative medical organizations available[5]

This means that even though the government has not yet mandated that ASCs use EHRs, the clinicians, consumers and affiliated healthcare providers who use ASCs are bringing new expectations for digital healthcare capabilities. The fact that nurses considering employment are looking at EHR usage, coupled with the fact that consumers are looking for technologically advanced providers, should give pause to ASCs who still rely on paper charts.

1   Moffit, Robert E. and Steffen, Ben. May 2017. Ambulatory Surgical Centers Electronic Health Record Adoption. Retrieved from http://mhcc.mary-land.gov/mhcc/pages/hit/hit/documents/HIT_ASC_EHR_Rpt_20170517.pdf

2   Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology. 'Non-federal Acute Care Hospital Electronic Health Record Adoption,' Health IT Quick-Stat #47. dashboard.healthit.gov/quickstats/pages/FIG-Hospital-EHR-Adoption.php. September 2017.

3   The Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology, Health IT Dashboard, retrieved Oct. 14, 2018 from https://dashboard.healthit.gov/apps/health-information-technology-data-summaries

4   Oliver, Eric. (July 2, 2018). 18 things to know about EHRs in ASCs. *Becker's GI & Endoscopy.* Retrieved from https://www.beckersasc.com/gastro-enterology-and-endoscopy/17-things-to-know-about-ehrs-in-ascs.html

5   (April 20, 2018). Hospital technology is the new determiner of patient satisfaction: 2018 Black Book EHR User Survey results. Retrieved from https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/hospital-technology-is-the-new-determiner-of-patient-satisfaction-2018-black-book-ehr-user-sur-vey-results-300633556.html

The image of an ASC in the eyes of the clinicians and patients it serves and the affiliated providers it works with, has the potential to directly impact revenue. "If physicians, surgeons, nurses and patients are choosing technologically up-to-date ASCs over organizations stuck in the paper-charting era, it will definitely affect revenue," said Scott.

Another reason for ASCs to take a new look at EHRs is the availability of cutting-edge, ASC EHR solutions in the marketplace. ASCs have a choice of EHR solutions specifically designed for ASC workflow. Solution vendors now offer EHRs that can be deployed securely in the cloud, and which can integrate with ASC practice management solutions. Oftentimes, these ASC-specific solutions are also much more affordable than the expensive solutions offered by vendors that focus on hospital environments.

"These two factors – changing clinician and consumer expectations and the availability of high-performing, ASC-specific EHR solutions – make this a good time for ASCs to take a second look at the potential benefits of implementing an EHR," said Scott.

ROI: Let me count the ways …

Calculating the ROI on an enterprise technology investment can be complicated. But there are three broad areas where ASCs can expect to see measurable benefits as a result of investing in EHR technology.

1. Increased operational efficiency.

Operational efficiency means optimizing every resource – personnel, facilities, inventory – to maximize outcomes and minimize waste. A defining characteristic of ASCs is that they offer patients (and payers) surgical outcomes that are equal to or better than their hospital peers at a significantly lower cost. In order to maintain this competitive edge, ASCs need to regularly assess and refine their operational efficiencies.

In fact, one of the biggest potential benefits of EHR implementation is workflow optimization. By streamlining and automating workflow, EHRs can maximize efficiency. Two critical factors that can impact an ASC's ability to leverage EHR implementation to improve workflow are: (a) the willingness of the ASC to evaluate existing organizational processes, and (b) the capabilities of the EHR solution chosen by the ASC.

"Even paper charting systems can impede workflow if they are not aligned with the ASC's actual workflow," said Scott. "If an ASC is going to implement an EHR, they need to be willing to examine their existing

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workflow and be willing to make changes as they discover problems or inefficiencies."

This is an area where the choice of EHR solution is critical. EHRs designed for acute-care enterprises typically have limited flexibility when it comes to aligning the solution with a specific organization's unique workflow. In those cases, because of a solution's one-size-fits-all approach to software design, it can actually impede workflow rather than improve it.

One-size-fits-all solutions often turn into one-size-fits-nobody nightmares. That is why it is important for ASCs to look at EHR solutions designed specifically for the ASC industry. Beyond being designed specifically for the ASC industry, ASCs should look at EHR solutions that allow flexible charting. This means using a modular charting design that can be easily modified to align with the ASC's particular workflow.

An optimized workflow, facilitated by a flexible EHR solution, can translate into measurable improvements in efficiency. "One of the biggest impacts an ASC will see with a good EHR system is time saved for employees," said Scott. "For example, the right EHR will significantly reduce the time nurses spend on documentation, chart review, and chart completion, which frees them up to spend more time on other activities related to patient care."

2. Improved patient outcomes and patient satisfaction.

EHRs can improve patient outcomes by ensuring that clinicians have access to the right clinical data at the right time in the care process. Paper charts obstruct access to clinical data. It takes time to find a paper

chart (particularly if the chart has been put into storage, and must be retrieved, incurring file storage and retrieval costs). Once the chart is in the facility, it can only be accessed by one clinician at a time. And pertinent clinical data may be buried several pages deep. "With an EHR, the physician doesn't have to flip through a 30- or 40-page chart to find the information they need," said Scott.

The right EHR facilitates the clinician's access to the most current clinical data, including the most recent documentation, current medications lists, and allergy information. EHRs that allow concurrent charting improve data accessibility even more. Multiple clinicians – for example, the physician and the pre-op nurse – can access patient information at the same time. A color-coded indicator lets the viewer know which information has been updated. This can make a critical difference in care if, for example, the patient indicates a last-minute medication allergy to the pre-op nurse that wasn't previously recorded in the chart. "Concurrent charting capabilities give ASCs a huge advantage when it comes to patient care," said Scott.

3. Accurate case costing.

Accuracy in case costing is essential for optimizing ASC revenues. A long-term benefit of EHR implementation is better case-costing information. "Integrating an EHR with a practice management system allows an ASC to collect more accurate cost data," said Scott. "Instead of guessing on things like what supplies were used or how much nursing staff time was used in pre-op and post-op, you are going to have an exact cost of everything because it is documented in the EHR.

"That's a huge advantage when you go in to annual negotiations with payers like Blue Cross Blue Shield or United or Aetna," he said. "Now you can go into negotiations with actual cost data – not estimates, not projections – and leverage that data to get better rates."

Embracing the era of EHRs

Once upon a time, it might have made sense for an ASC to stick with the status quo of paper charting. But times have changed, and what once was adequate is no longer sufficient. Clinicians, consumers and affili-

ated providers have come to rely on the efficiency and accessibility of EHRs. Furthermore, when the right EHR solution is properly deployed, it can increase operational efficiency in a way that supports clinician workflow, reduces nurses' charting time and enhances patient outcomes.

EHRs can result in material savings, for example, by eliminating costs associated with the storage, retrieval,

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and filing of paper charts. EHRs can also result in long-term revenue gains by providing organizations with precise case-costing data that can be leveraged in negotiations with payers. "The ROI of EHRs for ASCs is no longer in question," said Scott. "The right EHR benefits patients, staff, and the organization."

ABOUT HSTpathways

HSTpathways is a top-ranked, cloud-based Ambulatory Surgery Center software company dedicated to serving the ASC industry. HST was named KLAS Category Leader for Ambulatory Surgical Center Solutions in the "2018 Best in KLAS: Software & Services" report. Clients include more than 700 organizations such as freestanding ambulatory surgery centers and ASC-hospital joint ventures, as well as 40 multi-facility corporate enterprises. HSTpathways provides the most trusted, enterprise software management solution available to the ASC industry. HST offers specialized software solutions to help ASC organizations achieve efficiencies with surgical scheduling, inventory management, EHR clinical workflows, medical coding, insurance and patient billing, and accounts receivable collections. For more information, visit http://www.HSTpathways.com.

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