

TECHNOLOGY

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Medical Information Technology

Medical Students Lead the Way: Will Doctors Follow?

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A study published in the December 2008 issue of *Academic Medicine*, the Journal of the Association of American Medical Colleges, found that new physicians coming out of high-tech learning environments feel less capable of providing safe patient care when placed in environments with less health information technology. Researchers at Vanderbilt University Medical Center asked medical students and residents their attitudes toward health information technology. The majority said they felt health IT made them more efficient (77%) and increased their ability to practice safely (78%).

The survey was conducted among Vanderbilt graduates and medical students who were placed in environments with less health information technology than where they were trained. Eighty percent (80%) of 328 respondents reported “feeling less able to practice safe patient care, to utilize evidence at the point of care, to work efficiently, to share and communicate information, and to work effectively within the local system.” The researchers conclude that eventually younger doctors trained with electronic medical records are going to seek residencies and practices that provide such technology solutions.

Unfortunately, the results of a recently published survey indicate that only four percent of physicians reported having an extensive, fully functional electronic-records system, and thirteen percent reported having a basic system. Primary care physicians and those practicing in large groups, in hospitals or medical centers, and in the western region of the United States were more likely to use electronic health records. I am afraid that this discrepancy between the medical school training standards and the reality of medical practice will result in the following:

- 1) Career choices will be influenced by the availability of medical information technology solutions at the workplace. Therefore, younger physicians may avoid smaller, rural primary care practices with minimal healthcare IT penetration.
- 2) Recent graduates will migrate towards larger group practices and those practices either owned, or affiliated, with a hospital system. Such medical practices are more likely to use electronic health records and electronic prescribing.
- 3) Younger physicians will consider paper-based medical practices as unsafe, antiquated and financially doomed entities and further deprive such clinics of sorely needed human resources.

I am using an electronic health record (EHR) in my family medicine and addiction medicine office since 1997. Most of my medical students and residents recognize the advantage of such a system and have given me invaluable advice on how to improve and maximize the utilization of my EHR. I urge all of my colleagues to overcome their resistance towards the installation and implementation of EHRs in their offices. Otherwise, we will have a hard time welcoming new colleagues in our offices and finding suitable new partners. Now is the time to change. Are you ready? Please feel free to contact me on how to transform your practice.

What are you waiting for?

Disclosure: The author is a practicing family physician, addiction specialist and computer consultant. In addition, he is a founder and managing partner of a medical IT company.