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## Medical Information Technology

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## Medical Practice Information Technology Solutions On A Tight Budget

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The recession has hit everyone hard. Many doctors are feeling the effect too. I have received numerous calls from fellow colleagues struggling to keep their business financially afloat. Therefore, in this challenging environment the call for investment in information technology falls on deaf ears. But doctors are caught between a rock and a hard place.

On the one hand, they know there is a need to invest in information technology solutions to gain access to reimbursement incentives, but on the other hand they lack the financial resources to purchase the required tools.

Most of my fellow colleagues believe that the financial requirements are too onerous and therefore do not even dare to seriously explore health information technology opportunities. Many (falsely) believe that they must purchase a complete Electronic Health Record for \$100,000 in order to meet the growing demands for practice management solutions.

Instead, you should ask yourself a simple question: how can I achieve my goals with the resources available? Lets not forget that Rome was not built in one day either!

Every journey starts with a single step. Your foray into information technology starts with a single step too. Before you invest ANY money you should map out the entire process and write a business plan. Your goal should be to analyze and describe your entire business workflow for each and every activity in your office. For example, describe each step in your patient care from the moment your patient sets foot in your office until he/she leaves the office. Ask your staff and office manager to document all business activities, collect and summarize them in a business procedure manual. It should be as detailed as possible to serve as a training manual for any new employee and should be revised and updated on a regular basis.

Once you know WHAT you do in your office and WHO is responsible for each and every step in your office you can start using information technology tools to optimize the existing workflow. For example, you need to know how long it takes to schedule, confirm and reschedule an appointment, how many work hours it takes and how much it costs you in staff time.

Then survey your patients to determine if they are satisfied with the current scheduling system and if they would be willing to try online scheduling features. At this point in time you should try offering online appointment scheduling features on your web site, or offer it as a stand-alone system. The initial start-up costs and monthly charges can be as low as \$4.99! I am using such a system in my office for two years and have saved thousands of \$\$\$ in staff time and phone calls and increased patient satisfactions. This can be a first step in the low-cost and smart use of information technology solutions.

The same principal applies to your current prescribing practice. How long does it take you to write a legible prescription and to answer pharmacy calls? How much of your staff time is being wasted verifying illegible prescriptions, answering patient requests for prescription refills, etc.? You may be surprised how many work hours you waste every week on these redundant tasks! Therefore, you should consider e-prescribing using online web-based services and wireless mobile phone based prescription solutions. In my practice I have almost eliminated prescription pads, except for controlled substances for which I print out the prescriptions and hand it to the patient. All of my refills are being handled electronically and I receive e-mail notification to remind me about pending transactions. I hardly receive any phone calls from the pharmacy anymore.

By creating a patient database you also take the first step towards an electronic health record because you can later export the demographic information into such a system. Before you start considering purchasing an electronic health record you should start preparing your practice today. How can you do that? First, use a comprehensive data extraction sheet and include one in every chart. During each patient visit scan the chart for relevant information and create an updated list which includes all current medications, diagnoses, patient demographic information, pertinent laboratory and imaging results, relevant pending and completed preventive medicine measures. You should also consider chronic disease management flow sheets for diabetes care, hypertension management, etc.

It takes at least 6-12 months to extract all relevant information. During this time you can engage in the electronic health record selection process. Once you find a suitable system your data extraction and chronic disease flow sheets will provide all essential information that needs to be transferred into your electronic health record.

You should not forget federal stimulus \$\$\$ are now available to educate and train you and your staff in the meaningful use of health information technology solutions. Do not miss the opportunity to sign up for this program! For more information contact me at [info@miamihealth.com](mailto:info@miamihealth.com).

I look forward to reading your comments and suggestions on our blog at <http://miamimedblog.blogspot.com/> or send me a twit at <http://twitter.com/dadedoc>.

**Disclosure:** The author is a practicing family physician, addiction specialist and computer consultant. In addition, he is a founder and managing partner of VirtualMed, LLC ([www.virtualmed.com](http://www.virtualmed.com))