

Lemak Sports Medicine implementing electronic data system

Birmingham Business Journal - by Jimmy DeButts, Staff

Dr. Larry Lemak takes a patient approach to technology upgrades.

The federal government is offering \$19 billion worth of incentives for health care providers to modernize their records, but the internationally renowned orthopedic surgeon isn't leaping for the cash. There are too many unanswered questions.

Instead, Lemak is taking a calculated technological step forward by implementing his first electronic data system. The principal of Lemak Sports Medicine believes this system will bridge his antiquated system with a future endeavor into integrated electronic medical records, or EMRs.

Physicians are being prodded to adopt EMRs with incentives worth as much as \$44,000 over five years from the federal government. The goal is to create a national network so health care professionals have instant access and can exchange patient data electronically.

Many Birmingham-area hospitals have electronic record programs, such as St. Vincent's and Baptist Health System, but there is no local integrated file-sharing system.

Complicating the federal goal toward integration are a multitude of EMR vendors with a variety of options that aren't necessarily compatible with one another. Lemak's measured response takes that reality into consideration so when his practice implements an EMR system, it will last.

Industry experts said the government's emphasis on EMRs is an effort to improve the quality of care and use more efficient documentation to lower costs. However, integration standards haven't surfaced to ensure adopting EMRs will produce the desired results, they say.

St. Vincent's Health System Chief Information Officer Tim Stettheimer said meshing various EMR programs is "the real challenge" of the government's strategy. With physicians paying as much as \$3,000 per month for EMR service, federal incentive money won't be enough to recoup implementation costs, he said.

That reality has some providers wary of jumping too quickly into the EMR fold, according to Lemak Group CEO Matthew Lemak. The Lemak Group administers physician practices, including Lemak Sports Medicine.

This summer, Matthew Lemak will implement a documentation system developed by Birmingham-based ComplyMd at his father's practice. He said ComplyMd's Web-based patient encounter software is the "most logical, cost-effective" first step to EMRs. That's why he and his father are gradually moving toward an EMR system.

"We're a long way from there," Matthew Lemak said. "ComplyMd gets doctors more comfortable doing electronic documentation."

Nir Menachemi, associate professor of public health at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, said the first step toward an integrated system is boosting the use of EMRs. He said health care is technologically decades behind other industries and the government's focus on EMRs is spotlighting that lag and helping spur needed infrastructure.

"The political window of support has been opened," Menachemi said. "The option of waiting on the sideline has expired."

St. Vincent's Stettheimer said a hospital with as many as 300 beds could spend \$12 million or more on EMRs, depending on the system. While providers who implement EMR systems by 2011 can begin receiving federal incentive money, those that don't will face reduced Medicare payments after 2015.

ComplyMd CEO Curtis Palmer said his firm's products are complementary to EMRs and can aid physician comfort with the process of electronically documenting each aspect of patient care. Electronic records offer a better picture of the care provided than their paper predecessors, Palmer said. Those detailed reports are critical as governmental scrutiny intensifies as it tries to trim Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement costs.

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