Editorial

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Recently, I had the pleasure of attending the Pri-Med Show in Chicago. Great emphasis was placed, both in the exhibits and in the talks on electronic medical records (EMR; and billing), on meeting the needs of primary care physicians.

I had a chance to discuss the status of EMR with many of the sales representatives, but I could not get a clear-cut feeling of the actual penetration of EMR in the medical community. It is obvious that many of the large groups (hospitals and university-based practices) have made it mandatory, and that those physicians working and associated with these facilities have had no choice but to transform into the system. The actual penetration into the private groups in individual practices apparently remains very low. A sales representative mentioned that those doctors, especially solo physicians, over the age of 50 and 55 have expressed hope that they will be able to retire before its use is finally mandated.

After seeing many of the demonstrations, some of the obstacles became quite apparent. Cost is probably still the main concern on the minds of many of the doctors. It is not unusual for the initial investment to be \$20,000 per doctor. That amount does not include training time, estimated at \$700 to \$1000 a day, and yearly support services, which usually range about 15% of the initial cost. Hardware, of course, is extra. The time and effort by doctors and their staffs, along with the need to change work habits, during the transition period is even more frightening to many physicians.

The computer companies are pushing the immediate benefits that EMR would bring to medical practices: greater productivity and possibly increased revenue. Still, many physicians see the changes occurring, the discussion from the government and the insurance companies, and they have to ask themselves whether there are going to be additional incentives from the insurance companies, government agencies, and community hospitals, which would greatly reduce the cost and burden for physicians in the future. If so, what is the rush?

Also of interest is that although many of the companies were giving very large quotes, there were a couple exceptions with significantly lower cost factors. Judging from the number of competitors, a significant decline in the cost could be envisioned.

I was very impressed with the progress on the hardware front. The tablets have shown significant improvement, especially in handwriting recognition, which could make life a lot easier using the EMRs.

Also, the software programs seem to be tailored much more to the real-life situation, with great emphasis on rapid multifunctioning.

We all realize this will be the wave of the future and most likely will be of considerable benefit for patients and for all physicians.