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ELECTRONIC MEDICAL RECORDS SOFTWARE

How do I justify the purchase?

BY RHETT KEFFER

Every organization making use of services by an athletic trainer should have an electronic medical records system. This is a bold statement, but one that is supported by factual and anecdotal evidence throughout the country. How many stories have you seen on TV, read in the paper or on the internet that talk about a death or life-altering event relating to athletes or students? While such tragedies are not always avoidable, having current and accurate health information readily available to the medical and other staff could certainly help prevent some of these from happening. An EMR system helps make the job of medical professionals easier and more productive by helping eliminate the need for them to be involved with data entry, paper filing or gathering information to report to the athletic director and/or school board.

Executive Overview:

- **Having files on a computer does not mean you have an EMR system**
- **Not everyone may be willing to use a computer; note some top barriers to adoption**
- **You need to protect your organization and yourself against law suits**
- **Concussion information needs to be organized and tracked**
- **Saving time will save money**
- **Justifying position(s)**
- **Going paperless combined with time savings will shorten your return-on-investment**

What is an EMR System?

In simple terms an Electronic Medical Record system is a computer software program that enables someone to save information about an athlete or student on a computer rather than on paper. According to Wikipedia, EMRs “contain the same information as traditional paper medical records (e.g., patient name, condition, medicine prescribed), but the data is not written out longhand. Instead, it is entered into some type of electronic device such as a computer or smart phone. The data can be retrieved by these devices later when needed.” Over the years these systems have taken many different formats.

What is not an EMR System?

There are some in the industry who believe using Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel or some homegrown database on a computer constitutes “electronic” medical records. I respectfully beg to differ. Simply put, using an Excel spreadsheet to record information is only marginally better than paper. The reporting capabilities are still limited, and information is not linked to be able to view an athlete’s history, staff history or provider history. Microsoft Word documents are even more limited. Most homegrown databases, while better, still have significant limitations. A true EMR would account for accessing information from multiple locations, sharing information with other medical professionals, and a way to include information from outside sources, and more.

Barriers to Adopting an EMR System

To many people the need for an EMR System is readily apparent. However, some people

still make the following arguments for not adopting a system, including:

• *Old Records/Information*

Time to scan or otherwise input old data is a “necessary evil” vs. not having the information readily available and perhaps missing something vital. Some feel this takes too much time and is not worth the effort. In my opinion exactly the opposite is true. It is well worth the time to get this information into a system so that it may be retrieved quickly and easily.

• *Privacy Concerns*

There is a misconception that paper records are more secure than electronic records. While it is true that electronic records may be viewed more easily, such access typically requires a login and password for access and the activity is logged. With a paper system, anyone can pick up a file and read it (potentially those who don’t have the right to do so). Such files may also be stolen and not recovered.

• *Down Time*

This is a term that is typically applied to computer systems, but in truth can take many forms. These include electronic systems and pen/paper systems. While it is true that computer systems are occasionally unavailable, this happens far less often than most people realize and not as often as it did in the past. While 24/7 access is the desired goal, electronic systems are more flexible and available than those affected by locked doors or file cabinets, locked buildings or someone carrying a folder or binder.

- *“We’ve always done it this way”*

This argument is used by some people in almost all situations, usually when they don’t understand the benefits of exploring a new way to do something, don’t want to be bothered to learn something new or are not willing to change (in my opinion).

Concussions

Concussions are one of the hottest topics in the industry today; and for good reason. Athletes who are unmonitored may easily suffer permanent damage or death. Systems such as Concussion Vital Signs¹ and ImPACT² that measure memory and cognitive skills combined with assessment tools such as BESS³ and the SCAT3⁴ give the medical staff information to analyze an athlete’s condition and recovery. New devices such as Neurocom’s Sport5⁵ provide an objective method to measure motor control and balance; giving the medical staff an assessment that is not subjective and one that may not be fooled by athletes. Along these same lines new oculomotor tests relating eye movement and neuromuscular links to the brain are becoming more popular.

Beyond the training required for the professional medical staff on concussions, training for coaches, parent and athletes is also necessary. Specifically, these non-professionals need to be aware of the warning signs, long term effect and treatments for a concussion. This added support increases the acceptance of not only proper medical treatment, but documenting an athlete’s “baseline” and treatment as well. This documentation is readily accomplished using an EMR system that allows all pieces of information to be gathered and available when and where needed.

Many states have finally mandated baseline testing for high school athletes and a mandatory “days off” once a concussion is diagnosed. It only makes sense to keep this information and any subsequent evaluations and associated information using technology so it can be retrieved quickly and easily by those authorized.

C.Y.A.

We are all familiar with unwritten business rules typically associated with “CYA.” For sports medicine three others apply as well:

- **Care for Your Athletes.** This is the bottom line and why most people enter the medical

profession. Typically they don’t plan on doing a lot of paperwork or filing papers, or tracking down an athlete’s file that someone may have misplaced or never completed due to time and no access to records at the time.

- **Consult Your Associates.** Quickly and efficiently communicate information with other medical staff to get a second opinion, or ensure that they have all the applicable information, medical history, etc. before treating or evaluating an athlete.
- **Check Your Archives.** I’ll talk more about this under the Return-on-investment section, but the time saved being able to pull records up electronically gives your medical staff more time with their

As a result of a lawsuit you may lose a good staff member because they are terminated or decide to leave. Even if the lawsuit is won or dismissed irreparable damage may be done. In this event the cost to replace him/her needs to be measured by not only the actual cost to advertise the position but also the time required to interview potential replacements, cover their duties, and time to train someone new with your methods and procedures. A paper system often leaves much needed information in the head of the athletic trainer who may have taken another job, and even if he/she is still on the job, a court takes little stock in what is said vs. what was written at the time of the injury.

The bottom line with lawsuits is that an organization that chooses to ignore potential problems or “burying its head in the sand” leaves itself exposed.

athletes ... you would be surprised how quickly the savings add up.

- **Cover Your A**.** This may be the most common, and perhaps import, “CYA” on the list. With the recent settlement in the NFL concussion law suit and the increasing number of other law suits you have to protect your organization and yourself.

Lawsuits

The quote “The best offense is a good defense” is often attributed to Vince Lombardi, the legendary 20th century Green Bay Packers coach. Having detailed records on medical treatment is your best defense. Any attorney will most likely tell you this. While there are those that say a lawsuit is not a problem unless you lose; the impact of bad press and the proliferation of that press by internet (blogs and web-zines) makes it harder to combat. Unfortunately even if the lawsuit is unfounded it may reputation of your organization and everyone involved. Of course, losing or settling a lawsuit still carries a significant price. When weighed against the average cost of an EMR system of around \$2000, the legal fees for a winning or losing case pale in comparison.

Return on Investment

A long time ago Ben Franklin stated that “Time is Money”⁶. It was true then and is more so now given the pace of today’s world. With an EMR system you are able to generate year-end reports in minutes. With a paper system, generating statistics relating to injuries and treatments in any detail takes considerable time. By comparison calculating by computer vs. by hand can literally be days instead of seconds given everything else that goes on during the day. Saving time searching and/or retrieving information by a number of electronic methods rather than thumbing through paper files is significant. Saving 15 minutes each day will save 60+ hours over the course of a single year.

In addition to the hard numbers of return on your investment, there are two questions you should consider:

- Based on the cost saving discussed in the previous sections vs. the average purchase price of an EMR system it is entirely possible to have an ROI in one year or less. While each organization makes its own decision on what is a good time period, this is usually two or three times the accepted “good payback” period.



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- Can you put a price on some disaster wiping out your paper files? Something like a flood or a fire can destroy years of records. To this end, you may want to check on how your current information is stored. Is it stored onsite or off? Is the area holding the files secured by a lock? Is there a log of who looks at what information?
- Can you put a price on having the medical history for an athlete at your fingertips when you take him/her to the hospital from an event? Providing the hospital staff with accurate information may sometimes be a life or death situation if there are allergies or other medical conditions involved. Can you put a price on knowing about an athlete or student's allergies, current medications or medical alerts while he/she is at an event outside of the school?

Justifying Your Position or Positions

First and foremost, nobody in sports medicine should have to justify his/her job. Given the economy and shrinking budgets you need the ability to track what is done and report the vital statistics. Reports and associated info showing "private" costs vs. salaries; reports and graphs showing the multitude of services provided; and reports showing the time specifically spent with athletes go a long way toward answering any questions. A good EMR system provides you with this information and potentially more if needed.

For Your EMR Software

Once you start looking for an EMR system you will find that there are a number of choices. Here are seven key points that will help you evaluate them:

- **Security;** is your information guarded by a login and password for each user?
- **Compliance;** is the software HIPAA compliant? Does FERPA apply? and is the software FERPA compliant?
- **Flexibility;** is information able to be shared? Can data input be done on a PC, internet and smart phone simultaneously without having to sync information?
- **Reporting;** are you able to get a variety of reports; including day-to-day reports and year-end reports?
- **Automation;** should you decide to participate in the available research project; will the software automate your data submission?

- **Customization;** are you able to customize features in the software, deciding what options to use and define information available for data entry?
- **Customer service and referrals;** can you get references, ask them about their experience with the vendor, and record them for future reference.

Staff and Athlete Performance

EMR systems can provide useful information for managing staff and overseeing athletes. Staff productivity may be hard to measure without documentation. In a paper system, if the paperwork is completed, you must add the information manually. Due to hectic schedules many members of the medical staff do not have the time needed to fill out paperwork. Using notes or memory to do this at a later time is often hit-or-miss. Taking advantage of technology with an EMR system allows for information to be entered & saved immediately in the field.

Managing athletes; how are they progressing in their rehabs, when are they expected to return to play, etc.? Financially, is there a long-term liability if they have medical problems later in life related to an injury and sue the athletic trainer and the school? Having an EMR system gives you the ability to quickly and easily monitor their progress, and maintain historical records.

Research

For over 25 years the NCAA⁷ has collected injury surveillance information, resulting in the largest collegiate injury research database in the world. In 2009, a non-profit organization called The Datalys Center⁸ was created by the NCAA, BioCrossroads and the ACSM⁹, to take over the operations of the NCAA Injury Surveillance Program. The Datalys Center continues to collect injury surveillance data from participating NCAA schools with the continued goal to support the sports injury information needs of organizations and individuals focused on improving the health and safety of students participating in collegiate athletics. Since 2012, in cooperation with NATA, this research will expand to include athletes on the high school level.

Participating in ongoing research project(s) gives your medical staff and school access to national statistics that may be useful in planning practices, work-out programs and other related areas.

- **Save time and money**
- **Measure staff performance**
- **Return on investments**
- **Law suit protection**
- **Participate in research**
- **Find the right software**
- **Take care of your athletes**

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to tell you why an EMR system should be a part of the budget for every school, college, university or other organization. The tangible and intangible savings realized by using an EMR system can easily far outweigh the cost. If you are not convinced that you need an EMR system, hopefully you found some information for consideration and discussion. §

Editor's Note: *It is important to note that the author of this article does have a vested interest in electronic medical records software. After careful consideration with our editorial advisors, we agreed the information in the article was valuable to athletic trainers, regardless of the author's connection to the product.*

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REFERENCES:

- ¹ Concussion Vital Signs, copyright by Concussion Vital Signs.
- ² ImPACT, copyright by ImPACT Applications, Inc.
- ³ BESS - Balance Error Scoring System (Developed by researchers and clinicians at the University of North Carolina's Sports Medicine Research Laboratory, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-8700)
- ⁴ SCAT - Sport Concussion Assessment Tool - 3rd Edition
- ⁵ Neurocom Sport, copyright by Natus.
- ⁶ Ben Franklin, "Advice to a Young Tradesman", 1748.
- ⁷ NCAA, National Collegiate Athletic Association, www.ncaa.org
- ⁸ The Datalys Center, www.datalyscenter.org
- ⁹ American College of Sports Medicine, www.acsm.org