9 Features Your Next EMR Needs to Have
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An efficient workflow is paramount to an urgent care's success. The difference between making a profit and experiencing a loss for an urgent care can be the speed of healthcare services delivered. It’s not surprising then that patient workflow is one of the major factors considered by urgent care owners when selecting electronic medical record (EMR) software.

Unfortunately, many urgent cares are often unhappy with their EMR's capabilities. Limitations can include poorly designed features, lack of technical support and training, and cumbersome on-screen navigation. Thus, it’s common that EMRs intended to improve patient care end up costing clinics time and money—and frustrating staff.

Most practices admit not fully considering their clinic’s needs when analyzing which EMR to choose and yet the most overwhelming reason practices state for wanting to switch EMRs is due to this very fact—lack of meeting practice needs.¹ As many as 17% of practices will have switched their EMRs by the end of 2013.²

You undoubtedly have a running list of features you’d like to see in your next EMR. As a software vendor who’s helped hundreds of clinics switch EMRs, we consistently hear that an EMR needs to have the following features.
FEATURE 1:

An Integrated Workflow

While many EMRs are advertised to have an integrated system, the truth is that they have the ability to “interface” between systems. A truly integrated approach means you don’t have to interface different products to get the main functionality you need in your Practice Management (PM) and EMR.

With interfaced systems, the software has the same information in multiple locations, and requires actions to send information from one system to another. However, with an integrated system, no actions are required to push data from one system to the other; integrated software uses one source of data.

For example, with an integrated system, if you enter a patient’s demographics in the registration portion of the PM, this info should auto-populate (in real-time) into the EMR patient chart and the patient bill. This real-time updating across all segments of the software means higher productivity with less data entry, less chance for human error, and fewer opportunities to miss charges. With a holistic, integrated system, there’s no reason to be double entering info or waiting for that data to be pushed into another system.

TIP: Look for an EMR vendor that offers an integrated PM and/or billing services as a part of their offerings. Also ensure you can easily customize workflow within the EMR to fit your clinic’s overall workflow management system.³

FEATURE 2:

Affordable Interfacing

No EMR is an island, even an integrated EMR. As a center storage area for patient data, an EMR needs to be able to transfer information both in and out of it. EMRs should offer you the ability to interface with outside labs, radiology centers, and pharmacies for ePrescribing. Most interfaces are accomplished through the Health Level Seven (HL7) standard language.

Interfacing should have two-way data sharing, effectively swapping information back and forth, so when updates are done in one system—a patient address
change for example—the change is also sent and recorded in the interfaced system. This joining of digital hands to accomplish workflow tasks like x-rays or lab work is essential to streamline an urgent care clinic’s abilities.

When evaluating EMR vendors, check to see if they have completed the types of interfaces your urgent care will require. The most common example of an interface is with a lab, such as Quest or LabCorp. If the EMR vendor has done interfaces like these before, they should affordably and quickly be able to create a similar interface for you, too.

**TIP:** Ask EMR vendors what their interface capabilities are—and if established third-party vendors are already in place.

**FEATURE 3:**

An Internal Messaging System

Communication is essential for a smooth workflow. Front desk staff must be able to talk to nurses, nurses to providers, and providers to lab techs. That’s a lot of information to be transmitted for one patient visit, let alone an entire day at an urgent care. Instead of using flags and sticky notes, look for an EMR that includes a messaging system within the software.

An EMR should allow you to send instant messages and attach scanned notes—such as those attached to a specific patient record. Conversations in an email system aren’t HIPAA compliant if they contain patient information. Face-to-face conversations aren’t traceable—and often forgotten. In an urgent care setting, saying something twice adds time to each patient visit, and lost procedures result in missed revenue.

**TIP:** See if the EMRs on your short list have an internal messaging system—and if you can tie communications to specific action. Ensure there is a tracking method (log record) or time-stamp option for communication audits. Management should have easy access to past staff conversations.
**FEATURE 4:**

A Secure, Cloud-based Model

If you've installed software, you know how much of a headache it can be. EMR vendors—and many software vendors in general—are moving to a purely cloud-based hosted environment. Rather than installing software directly on individual desktops or on a client's server, an EMR vendor with a cloud-based model allows direct access via an internet connection.

This means no matter the device used, or where a provider may be, universal EMR access is available 24/7 online. With built-in auditing (see feature #9), you can also track user access and documentation changes to ensure compliance. Implementation is significantly streamlined using a cloud-based EMR application—with access available virtually in minutes—perfect for an urgent care which can't afford costly interruptions when switching EMRs.

Without high upfront technology costs, an urgent care can install a cloud-based EMR more affordably by paying a Software as a Service (SaaS) fee to access the software. IT requirements for testing security and automatic software updates are done by the EMR vendor. With a cloud-based EMR, data is frequently backed up, the system is always up-to-date, interfaces are more reliable, and the environment is more scalable.

**TIP:** Reduce cost and time of EMR implementation by considering a cloud-based EMR. Make sure EMRs perform well on multiple devices and web browsers (ask for a recommended list of hardware and internet requirements). Also, ensure data storage is secure and HIPPA compliant.

**FEATURE 5:**

Training & Technical Support

Software is a tool, not a final solution in itself. To make an EMR successful, those who use it—both administrative and clinical staff—must be properly trained. When considering EMRs, ask vendors about their training programs. Do they have trainers on staff that will help get your clinic personnel up to speed during implementation? And is training included or an additional cost? What about on-going training?
Training programs, whether online or on location, will ensure your clinic stays up to date on software functionality. Access to online training helps save your clinic employees valuable time with training new personnel. This is especially helpful for urgent care clinics which can have frequent employee turnover, along with a high percentage of part-time staff and temporary personnel. Of course, personalized training will be the most effective for EMR mastery, so check to see if the EMR vendor has separate, role-based training for registration, triage, and billing staff.

Support doesn’t stop with implementation. You’ll need on-going help to answer questions as they come up after training. Make sure your EMR vendor has its own technical support team (not contracted personnel) to help you out—and see if extended hours are available. Issues tend to happen during non-business hours, so see if they have the staff to handle after-hours troubleshooting.

TIP: See if training and support is offered as part of the EMR pricing or if it costs you more. Online training programs will save you valuable time with new hires. Reliable, committed EMR vendors will offer comprehensive, role-based training and on-going tech support.

**FEATURE 6:**

Customization & Easy-to-use Navigation

Most software is made to be generic so it can be useful for a wide range of specialties. However, the best software providers offer personalization options; EMRs should be no exception. Customization can improve chart completion rates and overall revenue. You’ll also notice higher employee satisfaction and engagement when customization is possible.

A flexible EMR—even a practice-specific model—should allow you to change documentation processes to meet your needs. You should be able to create complaint-specific templates (and adjoining symptom attributes) based on each provider or clinic location’s desire. Staff reminders, free text fields, occupational medicine protocols, and reports should also be modifiable. Customization should be simple—without complex programming required.

An EMR needs easy navigation. While many EMRs utilize cumbersome drop-down lists and window-in-window navigation, an easy-to-use EMR should allow you to document in the least amount of steps possible. As with a paper chart, an
EMR should let various staff document an encounter in any order they prefer—and have an intuitive flow of documentation steps. To accommodate the needs of real-life urgent care workflow, your EMR should also allow multiple people to document in a chart at the same time. Navigation support like single-click selections, search queries, and favorites lists help providers from having to re-enter info.

**TIP**: Pick an EMR that fits you, not one that tries to make you fit within it. Ask up front about customization options so you know what can be changed within the software. Review what modifications will be needed for optimal EMR use with your staff. Create an ideal flow beforehand—and see if the EMR can do it.

**FEATURE 7:**

**Patient-focused Functionality**

A helpful EMR has features for patient interaction. A tablet-based EMR that allows for patient education at the same time as charting can be a vast improvement in delivery of care. Showing examples on a tablet can help the patient be more involved. In addition, an EMR can offer other interactive tools to help patients take charge of their health choices and payment options.

For example, an EMR should have a patient portal where a patient can login via the internet to view secure, private messages and documents from their doctor, such as lab results. A clinic can use the patient portal to transfer info to a patient's primary physician, in a HIPPA-compliant environment.

Another convenient EMR feature is online check-in, so patients can complete registration before they arrive at the clinic. Software that offers patients the ability to pay online or setup payment plans can vastly improve the patient experience—and your clinic's collection time. A helpful EMR also should offer discharge instructions and modifiable educational handouts relevant to the patient visit.

**TIP**: Engage patients with an EMR that allows for interaction. Collaborate and communicate back and forth with patients with an EMR that has a secure patient portal. Also consider using a tablet-based EMR that helps improve patient-doctor interaction.
FEATURE 8:

Designed with a Dedicated Focus

Each practice has its own intricacies. A chiropractor office’s workflow is different than a pediatric clinic’s. Physical therapy is different than cardiology—and so forth. To ensure your clinic is using the best EMR, choose one that has the same focus as you do. This cuts down on modifying an EMR to fit your clinic workflow, since presumably the software is already aligned to typical patient scenarios you’ll be facing.

Trying to fit within a one-size-fits-all EMR will only cause frustration with generic documentation steps and templates that don’t fit your practice’s flow. Larger EMR vendors often focus on servicing hospitals and general practice clients—and don’t make EMRs to fit specialized medicine—nor are they focused on speed of documentation.

TIP: Pick an EMR that’s made specifically for your practice, even if it’s not as mainstream as other larger EMR vendors. Also, beware of free generic EMRs who promise affordability but give you limited options—and charge for individual actions within the software.

FEATURE 9:

Built-in Auditing & Reporting

Accountability is crucial. It’s wise to pick an EMR that can track users’ actions within the system, for legal reasons and employee performance reviews. See if the EMRs you are considering keep an easily viewable audit log with time stamps, actions completed, communication records, and items documented on the patient’s record. Audit logs will also help prove you’re meeting measures for Meaningful Use attestation—and show critical data if you’re reviewed for compliance.

An EMR with reporting functionality should give you a bird’s eye view of what’s going on in each of your clinic locations. Data should include patient wait times, door-to-door times, patients seen per hour (and per provider), payment information, and so forth. While productivity reports can point out staffing needs, financial reports can help administration know where revenue gaps are occurring. Make sure reports have a “push button” option, and don’t require you to know programming or ask the EMR vendor to run the report.
**TIP:** Get an EMR with built-in audit logs and reports. You’ll be working blind if your EMR doesn’t give you these critical numbers—which help you know how your urgent care is doing. Some EMRs have better reporting functionality than others, so see if the EMR’s abilities match what reports you’ll want.
CONCLUSION

It can be a daunting task to choose the right EMR for your urgent care—especially with so many EMRs to choose from. The success of your urgent care is hindered or helped vastly by your EMR vendor. If you’re switching from your current EMR, you already know the limitations some EMRs can have. Take your time and test each EMR option against the features you need it to have.

The perfect software, including a perfect EMR, doesn't exist. But there is an EMR that will work best for your clinic’s situation. An EMR review committee, composed of various roles and perspectives can help your clinic choose a new EMR. Most importantly, don’t settle for an EMR that will put you in the position of having to switch again. A good EMR will make your urgent care run smoothly—and grow with your changing needs. Only you can determine which EMR that is.

REFERENCES


