

Local Physician Brings Paperless Medical Office To Reality

Program Helps Doctors Manage Office Functions In Paperless Environment

A St. Louis practicing physician has created a company to help doctors manage their office functions in a completely paperless environment. John Costello, president of Medical Office Online, Inc., has created an online total practice management service designed to revolutionize the doctor's office.

Medical Office Online combines scheduling, electronic medical records, prescription writing, letter writing and image capture functions in a single Application Service Provider (ASP) service. The company launched the service this summer.

"I designed this system for my own office because I saw a void in the products on the market," said Costello, who specializes in internal medicine and rheumatology. "The service is a complete package with no add-ons, modules or extra options. And it was designed so one database feeds all functions, meaning you will never have to enter the same information twice."

Costello said this approach to practice management offers doctors the ability to accelerate the note-taking or transcribing, and eliminate paper filing functions currently being used in the obsolete paper chart system. Doctors using the online version simply log on to their own personal, totally secure, browser-based database at the start of the workday and begin recording patient notes into the computer for each patient visit. At the completion of the visit, it is then saved and is immediately ready to be filed as an electronic claim.

Essentially, doctors can access a concise summary of all information pertaining to an individual patient's care, including an efficient view of past hospital visits, lab test results, previous medications, etc.

The system is tailored for the independent physician or small group of up to 12 physicians. Aside from positively impacting patient care, other goals of the service are to enable the office to become virtually paperless inside of four months, improve patient record-keeping, enhance the communication between the doctor and his patients, and eliminate the daily chores of filing, copying, data re-entry and transcribing.

The most innovative qualities of the service include:

- The ability to scan and attach the

patient's photo ID and insurance cards into the database.

- Automatic capture of charges into the electronic medical record.
- The background tallying of evaluation and management coding.
- The ability to communicate with all of the health care parties, such as pharmacies, payers, testing facilities and regulators.

Priced at an online subscription rate of \$250 per month, Costello said the service eliminates the need for doctors to purchase expensive software packages. "We wanted to provide doctors with an affordable, easy-to-use system that was well within the price range of every practice situation, from the inner-city to the rural doctor. And the beauty of this service is that it's accessible anywhere, anytime, worldwide, because it is on the Web," Costello said.

Offices will need broadband access to utilize the service, but Costello said most doctors already have high-speed access in place. "Most doctors are already realizing the necessity of having broadband Internet access in their offices," he said. "Services such as online medical textbooks, laboratory results retrieval and electronic claims filing are standard medical office characteristics today. Having doctors add a few more off-the-shelf computers for each exam room and the front desk is not a costly outlay. Because the system is Web-based, there is no need to install an expensive server or software."

Costello's firm is now working on a system that patients can utilize. Said Costello, "Our next innovation will be to make this service accessible to patients, so they can view and retrieve their own medical records anywhere in the world."

As Health Premiums Rise, Medical Savings Accounts Get Second Look

(Continued from Page 1)

"I think the timing is getting better (for people embracing MSAs)," said Jim Powell, a benefits advisor for several firms. "People are waking up to double digit increases, and healthy people are getting stung."

Powell said MSAs are ideal for the self-employed facing rising rates. However, if your health is shaky, a group plan may best fit your needs. "If you are unhealthy, MSAs don't look as good," he said.

MSAs aren't new. They are a product of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996. Since their inception, MSAs have received the cold shoulder from many. "I think the early problems with MSAs was the two-year sunset rule imposed by the government," Powell said. "No one was going to invest time and energy in something that wasn't going to last. And at the time, the economy was rocking. Higher deductibles scared people back then. Now, with double-digit increases, more and more people are willing to take a look at higher deductible plans. More and

more firms are migrating toward higher deductible plans. They are being marketed, and they are being well received."

Stoker sees MSA demand growing. One reason: Besides the possibility of saving on premiums and out-of-pocket health expenses, MSAs come with several tax advantages. Premiums are tax-deductible, as are 65% of the contributions to the savings accounts for individuals and 75% for families.

Policyholders can invest savings-account funds in stocks, bonds and mutual funds, and returns are not taxed. Nor is money taxable that's withdrawn from accounts to pay for health expenses. At age 65, policyholders may retain their savings accounts or roll them over into IRAs.

"Just in the last year, I've seen a lot of interest," she said. "People aren't as afraid to look at something that doesn't have that co-pay on it.

"There is a point where people can't afford the premiums they are paying."