Making the Most of Meaningful Use: Why Choosing the Right EHR Matters
Most healthcare professionals understand how electronic health records (EHRs) can drive greater patient engagement and improve the quality of care. They also see the potential value of enhanced productivity and efficiency for their practices. What's not as clear: how to choose the right EHR vendor or how to transition to a new EHR smoothly and within government guidelines.

Whether you’re attesting for Stage 1 or Stage 2, this guide provides an overview of Meaningful Use, highlights the requirements for 2015, and provides tips for selecting the right EHR to avoid penalties and position your practice for continued success in the future.

What is Meaningful Use?

The Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act was designed to assure that healthcare providers are properly trained and equipped to be meaningful users of certified electronic health records.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) established EHR Incentive Programs to provide financial incentives for the “meaningful use” of certified EHR technologies by eligible professionals and hospitals to improve patient care. To receive an EHR incentive payment, providers must demonstrate that they are “meaningfully using” their EHRs by meeting thresholds for many different objectives, over multiple stages.

Key Changes to Meaningful Use in 2015

The healthcare environment in 2015 continues to significantly change, and Meaningful Use (MU) is no exception. Key changes affecting Meaningful Use in 2015 include:

- Stricter EHR certification requirements
- Growing complexity between stages
- Enforced payment reductions

EHR Certification: Raising the Bar

In a final rule issued in 2014, CMS acknowledged the low availability of 2014 certified EHR technology (CEHRT) and granted providers some flexibility. Providers who were unable to implement a 2014 CEHRT were allowed to attest for MU using a 2011 Edition CEHRT or a combination of 2011/2014 Edition CEHRTs in 2014.

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1 Source: http://www.cms.gov/Regulations-and-Guidance/Legislation/EHRIncentivePrograms/Meaningful_Use.html
In 2015, EHR certification requirements are stricter. You now must use a 2014 certified EHR in order to meet MU requirements. However, the EHR certification process has been increasingly difficult for many Healthcare IT (HCIT) vendors - through November of 2014, less than 500 EHRs have achieved 2014 Complete Ambulatory Certified EHR certification. In comparison, almost 2,000 EHRs were certified for Stage 1 prior to 2014.

If your current HCIT vendor cannot meet the 2014 EHR certification requirements, you will not qualify for MU. Therefore, you should verify that your current system meets the 2014 EHR Certification requirements. If your current EHR does not, then you should begin to look for a vendor who can meet these requirements to allow you to meet your Meaningful Use goals.

**Maturing Meaningful Use Program Brings More Complexity**

As you transition between the different stages of MU, the requirements are more complex and harder to achieve. Some objectives have a minimum threshold requirement. Others require a specific action to be taken, or functionality to be enabled on your EHR. For Stage 1, you must fulfill all of the required 13 core objectives, 5 of the available menu Objectives and 9 Clinical Quality Measures (CQMs).

When transitioning to Stage 2 there is a significant increase in the number of required objectives, along with an increase in the thresholds for each. To meet Stage 2, you must fulfill all of the required 17 core objectives, 3 of the available Menu Objectives, and 9 CQMs. The thresholds for the objectives have also increased between stages, for example, for MU stage 1 > 50% of all unique patients have preferred language, gender, race, ethnicity and date of birth recorded, whereas MU Stage 2 increases the threshold for this same requirement to > 80% of all unique patients.

This increase in the number of required objectives, along with the increased thresholds, makes partnership with the right vendor critical. This means ensuring your EHR not only meets these requirements, but also makes the process extremely easy for you. Implementing a beautifully designed EHR with easy-to-use workflows will allow you to meet these stricter requirements, and keep you positioned for success going forward.
Patient Engagement Remains Critical

Although patient engagement continues to be essential for Meaningful Use, a disparity exists. According to a recent survey, 82% of patients state that access to medical records is important\(^2\), however overall access to, or use of, patient support tools is less than 40\(^\%\)\(^3\). Overall, patients want greater access to their physicians and health records.

Patient engagement requirements also increase with each Meaningful Use stage. For example, Stage 1 requires that patients have access to their clinical data; Stage 2 requires greater engagement between patients and physicians. As physician practices move to Stage 2, providers now need patients to both access information through a patient portal and use that information more meaningfully.

As the healthcare industry moves from a one-way mechanism of direct provider care towards a more integrated system of physician and patient engagement, practices are looking for ways to meaningfully engage with patients without increasing the overall practice costs. Patient portals are critical. They can help patients to become more engaged in their health, which will drive better outcomes.

Financial Penalties are on the Horizon

All Medicare eligible professionals that attested for MU in 2014 will need to report for a full year starting in 2015. As the requirements for Meaningful Use increase between the two stages and become more difficult, many Medicare eligible professionals may begin to face penalties starting in 2015.

All Medicare Eligible Professionals who do not demonstrate MU are subject to payment adjustments starting January 1, 2015. Only providers with an approved hardship exception are exempt. Payment reductions start at 1\(^\%\) and increase each year, up to a maximum of 5\(^\%\). If you’ve already started the program, then you must continue with the program to avoid these penalties as well.

Meaningful Use in 2015 is harder than ever before. The changes to EHR requirements, coupled with the changes from MU Stage 1 to MU Stage 2, and the threat of penalties may leave you feeling frustrated. However, partnering with the right HCIT vendor will help get you on the right track to meet your MU goals.

\(^3\) Source: Ibid
**Tip 1: Find vendors that can quickly adapt to a rapidly changing industry**

As the Meaningful Use requirements grow in complexity, it’s critical to partner with the right HCIT vendor now more than ever before. Many EHRs on the market are built on old, proprietary technology. They’re client-server based, difficult to update, and expensive to upgrade. Moreover, these legacy vendors are slower to react to industry changes, and may keep you from meeting tough MU requirements.

On the other hand, modern cloud-based vendors that leverage agile development to code, test, and quickly release new enhancements can easily meet the evolving requirements. They also help save you money because of lower ongoing IT costs. By partnering with a cloud-based vendor - that can quickly adapt to industry change - you can see more patients, streamline operations, and easily meet the changing requirements of healthcare reform.

**Tip 2: Usability and beautiful design are key for EHR success**

As MU requirements get tougher, having an EHR that is beautifully designed and easy to use is critical to staying productive. Old, clunky systems cause you to spend all of your time fighting technology, instead of caring for patients. Partnering with an EHR vendor that has beautifully designed software makes your user experience more intuitive and eliminates the need to spend extra time with your EHR. And by having software that is easy to use and simple to learn, you can easily adapt to MU changes. This gives you more time to focus on your patients, and deliver better patient care.

**Tip 3: Find an EHR that includes a fully integrated patient portal**

As new MU requirements increase the need to drive patient engagement, it is important to look for ways to do this as efficiently as possible. Vendors that bolt together EHR and patient portals are costly and difficult to use. On the other hand, partnering with a vendor that has a fully integrated EHR and patient portal solution streamlines your workflow, and reduces administrative burden on your practice. By having a fully integrated solution you can more easily meet MU requirements, minimize additional work for your staff and drive better patient engagement.
Conclusion

As the requirements for Meaningful Use get harder and more complex, partnering with the HCIT vendor becomes even more essential. To do so, you must look for a vendor that can meet the tough MU requirements in 2015, but can also adapt to the changing needs of a practice during an era of reform. Cloud-based vendors that have fully integrated EHR and patient portals will help you to not only meet you MU requirements, but also drive better patient outcomes and practice efficiency now and in the future.

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CareCloud is helping thousands of physicians to increase collections, streamline operations and improve patient care in 48 states and currently manages over $3 billion in annualized accounts receivables on behalf of its revenue cycle management clients.

1-877-342-7519 – hello@carecloud.com