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Tech-enabled Population Health at Small Practices is Complex

December 09, 2016 | Population Health, EHR, Health IT, Technology

By JoAnna Haugen

Physicians are increasingly turning to technology to help address population health. It's being used to manage clinical data, streamline care coordination, identify potential health risks and empower patients to address their healthcare needs, and as value-based care becomes standard practice, technology will play an even bigger role.

Unfortunately, selecting the right technology for a small practice is not simple. Hardware, software, licensing and maintenance all come with a price tag. Moreover, training staff requires additional financial resources and it can be understandably — and

So where can practices get the most bang for their buck? Gaby Loria, senior market researcher at Software Advice, a consulting firm based in Austin,

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Texas suggests physicians consider their primary patient profile. "The best way for physicians to prioritize tech investments for population health is to evaluate which solutions will make the biggest impact on their patients' well-being," she says. For example, physicians who have particularly proactive patients may benefit from a patient portal while those who see many people with chronic conditions may find a solution that can detect gaps in care to be more advantageous.

Though a lot of technology requires a financial investment, this is not always the case. For physicians who are just starting to dabble in tech investments, there are some free EHR systems that have built-in population health tools and functions, such as patient portals and clinical reporting. Additionally, those working in small practices may want to seek out others making similar technological decisions. Working with like-minded independent physicians in a growing group practice, or through an independent physician association or network, can help spread the cost, says Clive Fields, president of Village Family Practice and chief medical officer of VillageMD.

Cost issues aside, when deciding what technology is best suited to a practice's needs, it is imperative that physicians understand how different types of software will work together, especially with your EHR. Technology needs to play a support role within the practice to help advance clinical outcomes, improve quality and lower costs.

"I advise primary-care physicians in small practices to try not to fall in love with the latest app or newest gadget and be practical about technology they purchase," Fields says. The fanciest technology available isn't going to be efficient if it doesn't allow for seamless integration with tools and solutions currently in place. Patient data should seamlessly and securely move among and between systems in or near real-time. If it doesn't, consider the cost and manpower that may be required for manual entry, thereby negating any cost savings the technology may have offered.

Decision-makers at small practices need to have honest conversations about their needs with all vendors before purchasing any technology. "If they can't guarantee the products will interface with one another, it may be more trouble than it's worth," Loria says.

Ultimately, Fields says, the physician-patient relationship is the utmost priority for any practice, and if a new technology solution can benefit the relationship, it may be worth consideration. However, he says, "if a solution hurts the relationship or completely gets in the way of it, it's probably better to pass."

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