

EMR & Tech Report

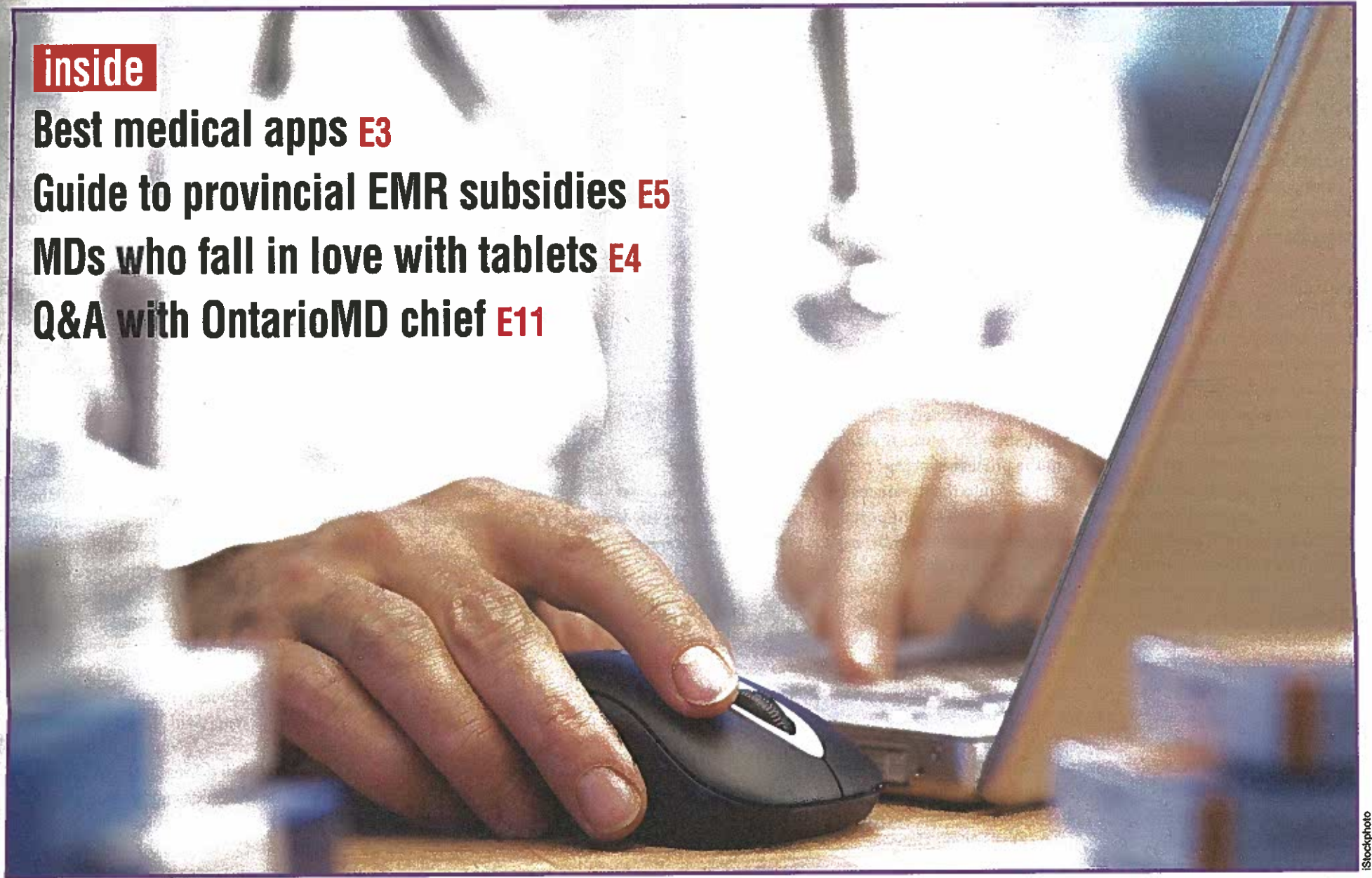
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EMR buying for dummies

Ask hard questions, take small steps when implementing an EMR for the first time

IT TOOK YOU A WHILE, but the moment has finally arrived. Your last patient has left for the day and the representative of the electronic medical record (EMR) vendor you've partnered with is sitting patiently in your waiting room. Your head is filled with questions: What can this new computer system do to clean up my current billing system, which is a mess? Will it speed up referrals? How will this EMR system help connect me to the other physicians in my clinic?

Dr. Jigar Patel, a physician and executive with Cerner Corp., a vendor based in Kansas City, Mo., with operations in Canada, said questions like these are crucial to ensuring a smooth transition from a paper-based office to an EMR.

"Some of the key things a physician should ask are 'What are my needs? What problem am I trying to solve? What is the process for doing things throughout my clinic—not just me but the entire staff of the clinic?'" he said in an interview.

That last point is particularly important, said Saskatoon urologist Dr. Kishore Visvanathan: Your staff will likely feel more anxiety about making the switch than you or your partners. "So ask (EMR vendors) many questions: 'How can I access it remotely at home and in the hospital,' and 'What kind of training are you going to give me and my staff?'"

Above all, Dr. Visvanathan told the *Medical Post*, be wary of vendors who make too many promises. Find

by David Godkin

out what an EMR system can do for you right now, not what it might do down the road. Then, once you settle on a particular system, think carefully about how you're going to introduce it into your practice.

Pace yourself

Randy Gaebel, vice-president of operations for Med Access, an EMR provider in Kelowna, B.C., has two pieces of advice that come in handy here.

First: Start slowly. "Set some goals for yourself. For example, you might say 'I'm going to record my prescriptions on my EMR for five of my patients today.' That's a good start. Or, 'I'm going to record complete visit notes on two of my patients.'"

"The second bit of advice would be to book lightly; scale back your bookings for the first few days as you're 'going live,' especially when your vendor (representative) is on site."

Taking even one or two fewer patients every hour gives you more time to acquaint yourself with the technology and interact with the trainers on site. Introducing the system gradually also helps to overcome a fear many doctors have that an EMR will slow them down.

"Fast forward after six months to a year and physicians actually become faster," said John Bodolai,

executive vice-president of Nightingale in Markham, Ont. "Because they've got access to information more easily and find . . . templates and things of that nature actually speed up their work flow."

Find that winning combination

So, what should any self-respecting EMR system offer the busy medical practitioner?

According to Silvio Labriola, business development manager for vendor Intrahealth Canada in North Vancouver, B.C., EMR platforms break down into three categories: administrative, clinical and, if you share an office with other physicians, system-wide administrative functions. The common feature to all three is their ability to handle repetitive computer tasks with ease, and to do it well.

For example, prior to the advent of EMRs, checking past bills for information that might be used for your current billing, such as what and when you used certain billing codes, entailed an enormous amount of paper shuffling. In a computerized system, observed Labriola, "you can simply run a report that gathers all that information."

That's an EMR's main benefit for Dr. Margaret Bertoldi, a pediatrician in St. Thomas, Ont. "I find the billing to be much easier on an electronic chart

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Dr. Visvanathan

EMR buying

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because I just bill as I go, as opposed to having a billing sheet at the end of the day that I have to fill out on one more piece of paper."

On the clinical-management side, Paul Baker of vendor Osler Systems in Sidney, B.C., said an electronic patient chart demonstrates its usefulness the moment you're able to "drag and drop" earlier patient history into your latest visit entry—instead of writing it out all over again by hand. Or take lab results as another example, he said in an interview.

Baker called these "the low-hanging fruit" of the EMR business: Any vendor who helps a doctor eliminate the reams of paper used in traditional lab results has a client for life. The advantages become readily apparent when the results come back from the lab, said Baker.

"Once a lab test is done, the lab will send it automatically straight into your EMR. The system identifies the patient, it automatically saves the result into the patient chart and flags abnormal results so you can deal with those first.

"It gives you a centralized place where you can deal with all of your incoming 'labs' relatively easily. And if you've got remote access, you can be sitting at home reviewing rather than sitting in your office."

Connectedness is king

EMRs are also becoming an indispensable tool for group practice. That becomes especially clear when you're covering for a colleague on vacation and struggling with their old-style patient notes—they often contain terrible handwriting, different note formats and missing information. All that goes away,

said Labriola, when that information is routed directly to your desktop.

"Things don't go missing in an EMR system. Once it's filed, it's filed. It's not a matter of having to go find stuff that someone hasn't filed or is sitting on someone's desk. (The record is) complete, it's there, it's in standardized format."

The good news, said Med Access's Gaebel, is that many provincial health ministries have already certified a selection of EMR vendors, to help with standardization of EMR platforms.

A few caveats when picking a vendor:

- Make sure the company is going to be around for a while. Do your homework and ask, 'Is it a viable company with a future?' to find out how long it has been in business.

- Ask the vendor about its service agreement. Does it feature a service

level guarantee with teeth in it or will you be left on hold, elevator music in the background, as you wait for a technician to answer the phone? Ask colleagues who may use the same vendor.

- Another big issue is patient privacy. Vendors that have gone through a full provincial conform-

ance process would have been subject to audits to ensure controls are in place to safeguard patient information. Ask if any third party has reviewed the data centre of the vendor from which you're considering buying.

- Doctors have their own advice, of course: "Learn to type," said Dr. Bertoldi, "and don't toss out your paper charts right away, because you're going to need them." Employ good EMR ergonomics, said Dr. Patel. "Having the patient looking at the back of my head while I'm looking at the computer is obviously a bad thing because you're not connecting with the patient as you should."

The best advice of all comes from Dr. Mel Cescon, a general practitioner in Kitchener, Ont. "If you haven't switched to electronic medical records, do it yesterday."

"Start slowly. Set some goals for yourself. For example, you might say, 'I'm going to record my prescriptions on my EMR for five of my patients today.'"

—Randy Gaebel

Best medical apps

by Vera Abdel Malek

A QUICK SEARCH for medical apps on iTunes' app store yields more than 3,000 results. With so many applications available, it becomes difficult to distinguish what's good from what's junk. With that in mind, the *Medical Post* has done some research for you. With the help of several physicians we've narrowed the list to nine apps that doctors may deem both beneficial to their practice and which can be accessed via multiple platforms.



Brain Tutor: This is a great tool for doctors and medical students who want a handy 3D brain imaging

application, said Dr. Antoine Eskander, an otolaryngology resident at the University of Toronto. Brain Tutor features head and brain models created from MRI scans and displays them in real-time.



Cancer Care Ontario Symptom Management Guides: This application is helpful for professionals

who need to manage a patient's cancer-related symptoms. "I use it to assess how cancer patients are doing in an objective manner," Dr. Eskander said.



Davis's Drug Guide: With this app providing information on more than

5,000 patented and generic drugs, Dr. Steven Zizzo, a family medicine resident at McMaster University in Hamilton, said he uses it with almost every patient visit.



Epocrates: This is another app that Dr. Zizzo uses often. It is marketed as being the top mobile drug

reference resource used by health-care providers. It's his favourite "because it has everything in one place." Dr. Eskander agreed, saying it seems to have the most extensive information on medication and diseases.



MedCalc: This app has been downloaded more than 800,000 times—and for good reason. It features

over 200 health-field formulas, scores, scales and classifications, some of it with very detailed background information.



The Merck Manual:

Contains information on diagnosing and treating a variety of medical disorders.

While Epocrates took Dr. Zizzo's title of favourite app, "The Merck" is a close second.



ResolutionMD: This

product requires access to a proprietary Internet server, but the benefit is an app

that allows quick and secure visualization of real patient medical images across multiple platforms. The images do not leave the server, so doctors are not at risk of losing confidential materials.

Interestingly, Dr. Mayank Goyal, an interventional neuroradiologist at the University of Calgary, and his team recently tested this app in a controlled environment to see if it could be used to diagnose a stroke. "We found that we were very good at picking up even subtle changes of acute stroke in these patients, finding out where the occlusion was and finding what the next steps should be." Dr. Goyal told the *Medical Post*.



uHear: This application

features multiple hearing loss screening tests. For Dr. Eskander, this app taps into his "ENT nerdiness."



5-Minute Clinical Consult:

This app, by Unbound Medicine, provides information on more than

900 medical conditions seen by specialists and general practitioners alike, and can be useful for doctors looking to get a quick refresher. Many doctors find this app useful in their practice, says Dr. Zizzo.

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