Unhappy with the EHR and worried about impact on care quality – Physicians respond about what needs to be done

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Frustration continues with today’s electronic health records (EHRs) at major health care systems across the United States. In the wake of the HITECH Act, new and powerful EHR systems were supposed to generate health care savings and improve overall care for Americans. After billions of dollars were spent on EHR adoption incentives, the data are strong that the HITECH Act did increase EHR adoption. (Adler-Melstein J, and Jha AK. HITECH Act Drove Large Gains in Hospital Electronic Health Record Adoption. Health Aff. 2017; 36(8).) (Schilling B. The Federal Government Has Put Billions into Promoting Electronic Health Record Use: How Is It Going? The Commonwealth Fund 2019. Available at: https://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/newsletter-article/federal-government-has-put-billions-promoting-electronic-health. Last accessed 9/5/2019.)

The data are equally strong that physician burnout has sharply risen, and the EHR is among the main reasons. (Gardner RL, et al. Physician stress and burnout: the impact of health information technology. JAMIA. 2019; 26(2). Arndt BG, et al. Tethered to the EHR: Primary Care Physician Workload Assessment Using EHR Event Log Data and Time-Motion Observations. Ann Fam Med. 2017; 15(5).) Clinical directors and health care executives are today facing an unhappy realization: after investing millions of dollars to purchase a complex new EHR system, they now risk spending millions more to hire new clinicians to replace those lost to burnout because of frustrations and inefficiencies with that expensive EHR. One national expert on physician burnout estimates the cost of replacing a single physician at $500,000 to $1 million. (Rosenfeld J. Calculating the financial costs of physician burnout. Medical Economics Blog. 2018. Available at: https://www.medicaleconomics.com/medical-economics-blog/calculating-financial-costs-physician-burnout. Last accessed 9/5/2019)

TransformativeMed Inc. conducted a survey among physicians and healthcare executives to learn more about how the EHR affects clinician happiness and what doctors think is missing from today’s
EHR systems. One hundred sixty-nine individuals responded and most of them (140) were physicians. Seven respondents were chief medical officers, three were medical directors, two were CEOs, and the rest were directors of either clinical areas or health informatics groups. The survey was conducted via email invitation to complete an anonymous online questionnaire. Respondents were nearly unanimous in the belief that clinician satisfaction does affect the quality of patient care.

When asked to rate how easy the hospital EHR is for clinicians to use, most respondents graded their systems in the middle of the scale. Fewer than 1 percent gave their system the lowest grade, while more than 10 percent gave highest marks to their EHR.

Despite agreeing with moderately good ease of use, physicians found little to love in their EHR systems: With answer choices ranging from “Complete information for making a clinical decision is in the EHR,” (12.8 percent) to “Communication across the care team is unified and seamless,” (11.2 percent) the majority of respondents (25.2 percent) answered “None of the above” to the question “What is it about your EHR that makes clinicians happy?” These responses are not driven by physician respondents who are generally uncomfortable with new technology. In fact, the majority of respondents (74.5 percent) answered “Yes” to the question “Aside from the EHR, has technology ever inspired feelings of joy or happiness in you?”
The key unhappiness drivers that rose to the top when asked “What are the primary reasons clinicians are unhappy with your EHR?” fell into three themes.

1. The EHR consumes more physician time than it should
2. Information is disorganized or missing
3. The user interface is neither intuitive, nor suited to specific physician workflows

Survey respondents were asked about features that would bring clinicians more happiness when using the EHR. The top five responses to this question were:

1. The EHR improves patient safety (14 percent)
2. They spend more time engaged with patients than with the EHR (13.7 percent)
3. They are more efficient (13 percent)
4. The EHR lets them focus on delivering patient care (12.3 percent)
5. The EHR lets them focus on ensuring quality care (11.8 percent)

These responses suggest that physicians are most interested in improving patient outcomes, with their own efficiency and time management second. Among the proposals for leveraging the EHR to improve patient care quality and safety is improved care coordination and communication. And while care coordination (14.4 percent), care team collaboration (12 percent), and communication unification (9.9 percent) were among the top benefits that clinicians are achieving today, most
respondents (77.3 percent) have not heard of the specific healthcare IT market category called “Clinical Collaboration and Communication.” This is perhaps because physicians do not typically spend much time evaluating potential marketed strategies or products to solve EHR problems. Ultimately, physicians are a very knowledgeable group regarding EHR impact on their happiness, with specific recommendations regarding EHR capabilities that would improve usability. In the survey, the most important capabilities that would improve happiness of clinicians using the EHR were:

1. Every member of the care team has the latest information about the patient (15.9 percent)
2. I don’t have to “hunt and peck” for information in the EHR (15.9 percent)
3. The EHR is customized to my workflow (15.5 percent)
4. When I do rounding, I always have the most important and recent information at my fingertips (14.3 percent)
5. I can access EHR information, securely message colleagues and receive notifications/alerts all from my mobile device (13.2 percent).

Every week, there is yet another article or research report published in a national periodical, website or a myriad of other credible sources, which highlights the challenges and frustrations clinicians experience with using “modern” EHRs. Yet, there are very few that actually propose or provide a
specific solution to the problem, except for TransformativeMed, where our software is natively embedded inside of the EHR and actually makes it usable. Our solutions have proven that it’s possible to improve clinician satisfaction, efficiency, enhance quality and safety and improve patient outcomes.