Your Practice Uses EHRs—
But Is It “Meaningful” Use?

Financial incentives will soon be available to physicians and hospitals that adopt electronic health records (EHRs), participate in Medicare and/or Medicaid, and meet other Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health Act (HITECH) requirements.

Recently released HITECH requirements outline how providers can become eligible for Medicare and Medicaid incentive money when they adopt EHR technology certified for “meaningful” use and meet certain criteria.

Studies have demonstrated the positive effect of EHRs on the delivery, quality, safety and continuity of patient care. In addition, EHRs are generally considered better than paper records for patient privacy and the security of patient information. As such, HITECH is intended to improve healthcare as it:

- Improves the quality, safety and efficiency of care while reducing disparities
- Engages patients and families in their care
- Promotes public and population health
- Improves care coordination
- Promotes the privacy and security of EHRs

Financial Incentives

The federal government will reward Medicare and Medicaid providers—hospitals, physicians and other professionals—who adopt and commit to the use of electronic patient health records. Bonus payments are available to eligible providers and hospitals adopting and implementing EHR technology under the Medicare and Medicaid Programs Electronic Health Record Incentive Program. Payments are scheduled to start in May 2011 and go through 2015.

The incentive is significant. Physicians could earn bonuses as high as $44,000 from Medicare or $63,720 from Medicaid over the next five years. To be eligible, an entity or provider must first participate in Medicare Fee-for-Service, Medicare Advantage or a state Medicaid program (some restrictions apply).

Essentially, physicians and hospitals will be reimbursed through Medicare and Medicaid after demonstrating the “meaningful use” of EHRs.

Necessary Steps

Financial incentives will not be attained merely by acquiring an EHR system and transferring patient information from hard copy to digital.

First, the EHR system must meet the standards and certification criteria in the July 13, 2010, final rule of the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC). These regulations specify the initial standards, implementation specifications and certification criteria for an EHR to become certified.

Further, the fact that a practice has purchased and uses a certified EHR system is not enough to qualify for the incentive program. The practice must meet three general requirements for providers to be considered meaningful users of EHRs:

1. Use the EHR-certified technology in a meaningful manner, including e-prescribing
2. Demonstrate the capability of exchanging electronic health information with the intent of improving quality of care
3. Submit information on clinical quality measures

Phased in Over Five Years

The meaningful use regulations will be phased in through three steps in the next five years. Stage 1 sets the baseline for electronic data capture and information sharing. Stages 2 (est. 2013) and 3 (est. 2015) expands on this and will be developed through rulemaking.

The ONC certification criteria complement the meaningful use regulations. (See Table 1.) The general idea is that any EHR technology certified
for meaningful use will enable providers to comply with the meaningful use and other administrative requirements of the incentive programs.

Although physicians and hospitals are not required to acquire the EHR technology to participate in the incentive program in the first five years, Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement will be reduced for providers who cannot demonstrate meaningful use by the end of 2015. This applies to Medicare physician providers, except those who are hospital-based, whether or not they apply for incentive funds. Providers in Medicare programs will be penalized if they do not meet the meaningful use requirements after five years.

To qualify for an incentive payment in Stage 1 (2011-2012), an eligible physician must:

- Have more than 80 percent of practice patients records in certified EHR technology
- Report on 20 of 25 meaningful use objectives (15 “core” and “10” menu objectives, at least one of which involves Public Health)3 (See Table 2 for the core and menu objectives and associated measures.)

**Certification Requirements for EHRs**

To qualify as certified, an EHR technology must be an electronic record of health-related information that includes patient demographic and clinical health information, such as medical history and problem lists. In addition, it must have the capacity to:

- Provide clinical decision support
- Support physician order entry
- Capture and query information relevant to health care quality
- Exchange electronic health information with, and integrate such information from other sources.

**What Should You Do?**

- Review the meaningful use and ONC certification regulations with your information technology specialists. The website, www.cms.gov/EHRIncentivePrograms/, contains up-to-date information on certification standards, certified EHR products, meaningful use requirements, instructions on registering and meeting the requirements, and the complete program timetable.
- If you’re already using an EHR system in your practice, determine if it meets the ONC certification standards for meaningful use. If not, start taking steps to bring your system into compliance, or purchase a new system that has received the ONC certification.
- If your practice’s charts are still paper-based, consider switching to EHR technology. Penalties for inability to meet the meaningful use requirements go into effect in 2016.
- ONC has started appointing EHR certifying bodies and providing information about product availability. Check www.cms.gov/EHRIncentivePrograms/ for updated information.
- If you are a Medicare or Medicaid provider and want to receive the EHR incentive, you must register beginning in January 2011. Go to www.cms.gov/EHRIncentivePrograms/ and select the “Registration” link.


4Ibid

**Providers Eligible for Incentive Payments for Meaningful Use of Certified-EHRS**

- Hospitals†
- Physicians (MDs and DOs)†
- Dentists (DDS, DMD)†
- Podiatrists (DPM)
- Optometrists†
- Chiropractors†
- Physician Assistants (practicing in a Federally Qualified Health Center or Rural Health Clinic)‡
- Certified Nurse Midwives‡
- Nurse Practitioners‡

† Medicare and Medicaid
‡ Medicare Only
§ Medicaid Only