

Do Specialists Need Specialized Electronic Health Records?

The best EHR system for general practice can be the best one for specialists too

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"With Amazing Charts we're at maximum efficiency and everything we need is in one system."

– Vishal Datta, MD, Endocrinology

Executive Summary

Physicians often wonder whether they should use an Electronic Health Record (EHR) system designed explicitly for their particular specialty. For family and internal medicine physicians, the answer is easy since most EHRs are designed to accommodate the requirements of general practice/primary care.

But what about other specialties with large numbers of physicians, such as cardiology, neurology, podiatry, pain, pediatrics, and surgery? What kinds of EHR options do they have?

By reading this white paper, you will learn:

- Why there are limited options for specialty EHR systems
- What specialists need from an EHR system
- How a general-purpose EHR system can often work well for specialists
- Where you can learn more about exploring new options for your EHR system

Where are all the EHR systems for specialists?

Google the words “best EHR for neurology” and pages of results appear. But none of the EHR systems listed are specifically designed for neurologists. Instead, they are general-purpose EHRs with a dozen or so templates for common complaints such as headaches or fainting.

You could substitute virtually any other non-primary care medical specialty or subspecialty in the Google search and get the same results. For simplicity’s sake, let’s continue to use neurology as an example.

Laws of economics demand general-purpose EHRs

Why is there no ambulatory EHR designed just for neurologists? There are approximately 20,000 neurologists in the U.S., but the majority of them are employed by health systems, hospitals, and large practices where they are compelled to use whatever EHR is already in place. That leaves fewer than 10,000 providers in physician-owned independent practices where they can choose their own EHR.

Software vendors simply cannot afford to develop and support EHR systems for such a relatively small potential market, especially with the added burden of today’s rigorous government certification standards. The laws of economics force vendors to build EHR systems that can be used by a wide range of practice types.

Pediatrics is the major exception to this rule. A few EHR systems cater almost exclusively to a market of over 90,000 pediatric generalists and subspecialists. These EHR systems customize billing, documentation, and workflow, making them worth consideration by pediatricians.

What do specialists really need from an EHR system?

Like all health care providers, medical specialists want an EHR system that is easy to learn and efficient to use. Affordability is usually another important consideration for small practices. Comparing affordability is relatively easy, but how do you define and judge efficiency?

When thinking about EHR efficiency for specialists, we see three key areas to consider:

- Documentation
- Workflow
- Integration

Documentation

As mentioned in the introduction, many general-purpose EHR systems include sets of pre-written templates for specialists.

Templates (sometimes called macros) are a powerful productivity tool, allowing physicians to insert commonly used words and phrases into the patient record. Templates can be used as complete exam notes that you modify as the visit progresses, allowing you to spend more time interacting with the patient than on typing.

When used appropriately, templates can be valuable in improving the completeness and efficiency of documentation, particularly where that documentation is primarily limited to standardized terminology, such as the Review of Systems (ROS) and physical examination findings.

How good are predefined templates?

The biggest problem with pre-written templates is that no two providers document in exactly the same way. Providers nearly always want to customize the canned templates that came with their EHR system. If every canned template is going to be reviewed and edited anyway, are providers better off starting from scratch with their own style and choice of words?

Overuse of templates can also result in cookie-cutter notes that all look and sound the same. This raises red flags if clinical documentation is audited. Additionally, templates don't always support good documentation. This is especially true for more complex patients whose stories don't fit within the confines of standard templates.

A better approach to templates

It is imperative for specialists to create templates that document the information that has value to them, and to do it with flexibility and simplicity. A general-purpose EHR system with a superior template creation tool may satisfy this requirement better than an EHR system with a set of canned templates for specialists but an inferior approach to creating templates.

As an example of a highly rated general-purpose EHR system for independent practices, let's look at how Amazing Charts handles templates.

There is a two-click process to create, name, and categorize a new template; a user simply highlights any free-form text entered into the system and then right-clicks to save it as a template.

“Amazing Charts is a very economical way of using an EHR. You are able to modify and make your own templates.”

– Arthur Lukoff, DPM, Podiatry

Templates can be used in the following areas of Amazing Charts EHR

- Addendum
- Allergies
- Assessment
- Chief Complaint
- Comments
- Email
- Family History
- History of Present Illness
- Letter Writer
- Meds
- Orders
- Past Medical History
- Physical Exam
- Plan
- Reminders
- Review of Systems
- Social History

To use templates, a user simply right-clicks in any text box in Amazing Charts and a list of prefabricated templates pops open. They double-click on the template they wish to use and it appears in the chosen section.

The user admin function allows for practice-wide control of templates. Users can create, modify, and delete templates, which can be sorted and viewed by person, location, or topic. Templates can be copied and sent from one provider-level user to another.

“I am a psychiatrist using Amazing Charts for medication management and more. Amazing Charts allows you to use templates of your own design and allows narrative entries rather than check marks, which I have never liked. I also have a nurse practitioner in my office who uses the program and is also pleased with it.”

– William Sullivan, MD, Psychiatry

In terms of organization, templates can be prearranged by body system or by complexity of examination, etc. Most users customize the order in which templates occur in their respective lists. Here are some clever organizational schemes developed by users of Amazing Charts:

Templates are usually listed in alphabetical order, but entries can be easier to find if organized by category. For example, an Amazing Charts user created 10 broad categories for his exam templates:

- 000 General
- 100 HEENT
- 200 Chest
- 300 Heart
- 400 Abdomen
- 500 Neuro
- 600 MSK
- 700 GU
- 800 Derm
- 900 Psyc

Then he labels the templates numerically, such as:

- 410 Soft, NT: “Abdomen is soft and nontender.”
- 415 No perit: “No peritoneal signs.”
- 510 WNL: “Neuro exam grossly normal.”
- 515 2+ DTRs: “DTRs are 2+ and symmetric.”

Users can also arrange templates by “system,” then “disease state.” Templates are listed alphabetically, so the most common ones can be named using a “space” or other punctuation first, which brings the user to the top of the list.

SYSTEM – State

- EYES – WNL
- EYES – Allergic
- EYES – Blephar
- EYES – Conjunct
- MOUTH – WNL
- MOUTH – Herpes
- MOUTH – Strep

Another Amazing Charts user has an “a to z” strategy for the prefix for systems, and he starts with the head and then works his way down. Normal results are a single letter, while abnormal results are a letter and a number: e.g., a = normal; a1 = allergies; and a2 = sinusitis.

EXPERT TIP

The bottom line is that every provider in every specialty has different documentation needs and priorities, which no single EHR system can address. Therefore, specialists should look for flexible and powerful template creation in a general-purpose EHR system.

Workflow

EHR system workflow is defined as the sequence of steps or processes required to complete a task from initiation to completion. These tasks can be complex and demanding, such as documenting an assessment and plan during a patient visit, or relatively simple, such as writing an e-RX refill.

All providers—whether they are specialists or general practitioners—want to complete a task with as few steps as possible. This often translates into having fewer fields to fill out, fewer boxes to check, and fewer windows to click through.

A highly rated general-purpose EHR system such as Amazing Charts offers the same level of efficiency across all workflows. For specialists, it is important to select an EHR system with workflows conducive to different types of encounters. Specialists need a workflow that works well for treating patients either one time, episodically, or repetitively. The same is true for a workflow that is designed around treating patient problems, which may be acute or chronic.

EXPERT TIP

When comparing EHR systems, you can count the number of steps required to complete a discrete task you do repeatedly throughout the day, such as documenting the History of Present Illness (HPI) or Review of Systems (ROS). The more steps, the longer it will take to complete a note.

Integration

To achieve maximum practice efficiency, EHR systems must be integrated with other tools and systems, both inside and outside the office.

For some specialists, the main priority is ordering tests and studies electronically, and then getting the results back into the patient's record with minimal intervention. This requires connections with hospitals, independent labs, and radiology providers. Some EHR systems can also integrate with exam room equipment such as spirometers or EKG halters.

An interface with a speech recognition system, such as Dragon Naturally Speaking, Medical Edition, allows for hands-free dictation and fast documentation.

Most specialists need flexible ways to manage images and documentation, which requires optical scanning and fax integration. Specialists also need to manage referrals from primary care physicians and coordinate patient care with other providers. A well-designed general-purpose EHR system will make it easy to summarize notes and send assessments and plans back to referring physicians.

The billing and reimbursement requirements of most specialties are no different from those of primary care providers. A general-purpose EHR system with a comprehensive and flexible approach, such as the one underlying Amazing Charts, can handle virtually any billing situation, from printing a CMS-1500 form to exporting data files to an outside biller to connections with third-party practice management systems to turnkey revenue cycle management (RCM) with financial analysis and reporting.

EXPERT TIP

Specialists should measure a general-purpose EHR system by the number of integration points it has as well the cost of those integrations.

Sample of integrations and functionality for specialists that can be found in a general-purpose EHR system, such as Amazing Charts:

- **Dermatology** – Freehand illustrations; drawing on digital images; photos attach to patient charts
- **Cardiology** – Direct links with EKG, stress, and echocardiogram test equipment
- **Podiatry** – Unique billing modifiers; foot image
- **Pediatrics** – CDC growth curve charts; head circumference; immunization and shots documentation; state immunization registries; vaccine schedules and information sheets
- **Pulmonology** – Direct connection with spirometer equipment
- **Psychology and Psychiatry** – Billing codes for the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of Mental Disorders IV

“Searching for preemies who will need RSV prophylaxis and prioritizing flu vaccines—so that the high-risk kids are notified first—can be done in minutes in Amazing Charts, making population management extremely easy. Instantly being able to pull growth charts and show parents how their child is growing is appreciated by the parents and makes my job so much easier.”

– Wendell Wheeler, MD, Pediatrics

Example scenario

Dr. Wellhead, a neurologist using Amazing Charts EHR, gets a referral from a primary care physician. Jane Smith is a patient with persistent migraine headaches who needs a neurological exam.

A practice portal is integrated with Dr. Wellhead’s EHR schedule, so Jane can set up an appointment online, fill out pre-visit form, and sign a HIPAA privacy agreement.

Before the visit, Dr. Wellhead receives Jane’s entire medical history from her primary care physician via DIRECT secure messaging, a point-to-point standard for exchange of sensitive clinical data. He can see her most recent lab results, medications list, history of present illness, and anything else shared from her primary care physician’s medical record.

The EHR is integrated into Amazing Charts Practice Management (PM) for billing, so the system automatically pre-verifies Jane’s health insurance benefits prior to the day of visit.

During the exam, Dr. Wellhead is able to focus on Jane because he has written several templates for clinical examinations notes, including one for headaches. With one click, he fills in the standard note and then modifies it for the particularities of Jane’s case. This means he can spend less time typing and staring at the screen, and more time making eye contact with Jane as they discuss her symptoms.

To help make an accurate clinical diagnosis, Amazing Charts provides Dr. Wellhead with contextual reference resources. Based on the keyword “migraine,” Dr. Wellhead can access evidence-based education about thousands of medications and diseases as well as clinical decision support tools.

Dr. Wellhead decides Jane should get an MRI for further evaluation. With an interface to a radiology provider, he can write the order electronically and receive the report back in Amazing Charts with a few clicks. Dr. Wellhead also has an interface to the lab at the local hospital where he is affiliated.

When the visit ends and Dr. Wellhead signs off on the exam note, no further data entry is required for coding and billing. The integrated Amazing Charts PM system supports the entire suite of diagnostic and procedure codes any specialty would need, and it’s easy to create “favorites” for the codes used over and over again. Billing is submitted electronically through a clearinghouse, for faster reimbursement.

As Jane leaves the office, she is given a set of patient instructions based on the templates written by Dr. Wellhead. Patient education is also generated by the EHR system.

Using DIRECT messaging, Dr. Wellhead securely communicates his assessment back to the referring physician, including his notes from Amazing Charts, a supplemental medications list, and other applicable results. He can also use the EHR system's built-in Letter Writer to pull up templates of letters back to referring physicians and fill in the details of the case. Finally, an EHR visit summary is electronically delivered to the patient via the integrated practice portal.

Specialists using Amazing Charts

Although Amazing Charts EHR was created by a family physician, it has been broadly adopted by a wide range of specialists and subspecialists. More than 40 percent of the practices using Amazing Charts EHR are in non-primary care specialties, including:

- Addiction
- Allergy/Immunology
- Cardiology
- Alternative & Complementary
- Dental
- Dermatology
- Endocrinology
- ENT
- Gastroenterology
- Geriatrics
- Hematology
- Hospice
- Infectious Disease
- Nephrology
- Neurology
- Neurosurgery
- Ob/Gyn
- Oncology
- Ophthalmology
- Optometry
- Orthopedics
- Pain management
- Pediatrics
- Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation
- Plastic Surgery
- Podiatry
- Psychiatry
- Pulmonology
- Radiology
- Rheumatology
- Sleep
- Sports
- Surgery
- Travel
- Urgent Care
- Urology

To learn more

If you are a specialist, we can help you learn more about Amazing Charts EHR. A free trial of the full version is available to qualified buyers. Please call us at 866-382-5932 (option 2 for sales), email sales@amazingcharts.com, or visit www.amazingcharts.com for information.

www.amazingcharts.com

866-382-5932, option 2

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