

Data-Backed Reasons An Electronic Health Record Can Improve Patient Care

Why should you use an EHR in your practice?

We dove into over 25 studies on EHRs, patient care, clinic operations, and more, to learn how this technology can power your practice.

Keep on reading to learn about all the benefits! ↓



Introduction

The Electronic Health Record (EHR) has been in existence since the 1960s, yet over time has evolved dramatically – thanks to transformations in technology, along with how healthcare professionals approach and tackle procedural, professional, political, and ethical issues.

Only recently have researchers examined the connection between EHR use, practitioner operations, and patient care. Will adopting the right EHR solution streamline processes, increase efficiency, and improve patient care? We went to the scientific source to see what's been studied to determine if EHRs indeed are worth adopting in your practice, and why.

The Problem With Paper

Before we discuss the benefits of going digital, it's important to explain why using paper could be ineffective and costly to you and your clinic.

The chief issue of traditional paper records (TPR) is that they are vulnerable to human error. Handwriting, no matter how neat, can be misinterpreted or misread, leading to incorrect information or medication errors like incorrectly processing a prescription drug order. (1) (2)

Moreover, paper information is more challenging to share with other clinicians, whether via computer data entry, scanning pages, or sending documents in the mail. Unfortunately, paper records are also susceptible to becoming accidentally damaged or destroyed.

Even though it *is* possible to send paper records in the mail, copying, transporting, and storing paper is expensive. The manual costs of paper add up, from the front desk time used to create and confirm appointments to the minutes and money spent faxing or mailing paper charts, lab results, insurance information, and so on. Meanwhile, The Center for Information Technology Leadership (CITL) revealed that ambulatory EHRs could save the healthcare industry \$44 billion per year. (3)

Paper charting has an enormous environmental impact as well, from energy costs and paper waste to environmental pollution. While computer usage also contributes to an increased energy consumption, it's environmental footprint is far less significant. To put this into perspective, **one study found that Kaiser Permanente's EHR, where 8.7 million individual patient records exists, eliminated 1,000 tons of paper records and 68 tons of x-ray film.** The paper did acknowledge waste contribution from computers, but concluded that "electronic health records have a positive net effect on the environment." (4)

The Benefits of Adopting an EHR

The number of practitioners and medical establishments who use EHRs is steadily increasing — nearly 90 percent of office-based physicians nationwide are using EHRs. (5) Still, there is some hesitancy around implementation, technical setbacks, trainings, and privacy; this paper is an opportunity to show the rich benefits of using an EHR.

The most obvious outcome of using an EHR is having a patients' health information all in one place. In theory, this will help practitioners better manage their patient's care, streamline operations, and save time. Let's look at five areas that have been studied that suggest how EHRs can transform a practice and its practitioners and patients.

1. Improved Coordination of Care

If you work in a multi-practitioner clinic, an electronic health record can be incredibly useful — allowing every health provider to view, input, and share information in one place. If a patient has a team of providers, each practitioner can more easily coordinate with each other without setting up meetings or phone calls. Even if your team consists of one person working the front desk, operations can still be positively affected with an EHR; **appointment creation, patient registration, and insurance verification likely will run a lot smoother if patient information is electronically stored.** (6)

Having access to a comprehensive patient record at your fingertips will also enhance communications with patients while helping them engage with their own health data. If patients have access to their health records, it could encourage them to take a more active role in their health. (7) Moreover, a quality EHR often powers SMS appointment reminders, follow-up emails, after-care instructions, and electronic prescriptions, so

patients can easily (and quickly) access the information they need to take charge of their well-being.

Don't just take our word for it. A national survey of 2,758 physicians revealed that 72 percent of them said an EHR improved patient communications, from appointment reminders to after-visit care. (8) Another research study that followed practitioners throughout the EHR adoption process uncovered that throughout implementation, **both patients and providers maintained a positive relationship while clinic workflow drastically improved.** (9)

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2. Better Decision Making

With a patient's health information centralized in an EHR, studies have found that doctors are able to make better testing, diagnostic, and treatment decisions.

In Western medicine, some papers conclude that using an EHR led to improved rates of recommended eye, foot, and renal exams for people living with diabetes. (10) Additional research reveals that EHRs helped generate a 10 percent increase in patients getting screened for breast cancer while another report found that using an EHR system in the emergency room correlated with a decreased number of readmissions within one week. (11) (12) Lastly, researchers suggest that incorporating patient wishes, preferences, and values in an EHR lead to better shared decision making. (13)

3. Increased Patient Satisfaction

Prior to 2015, few studies examined how EHR use might impact patient satisfaction. One worry was that patients might be less happy if a provider spent more time looking at a computer screen versus making direct eye contact with them. Those fears were reduced when one study found that patients were highly satisfied with their physicians, despite high EHR usage. (14) Experts recommend that patients sit at a desk with a nurse or physician to see their information on the screen while maintaining eye contact. (15)

According to a recent survey from Black Book (a healthcare-centric market research and public opinion research company), using an EHR to access patient records and communicate with beneficiaries and staff was found to be an important determinant of patient satisfaction. (16) Meanwhile, patients *want* healthcare providers to use an EHR. In the same Black Book survey, 84 percent of patients under the age of 40 said they specifically look for providers who use health IT systems to communicate and access personal health data, while **92 percent said not having access to immediate medical records decreased patient satisfaction.**

It makes sense that EHRs could make patients happier. Having an integrated patient portal for online forms and scheduling can reduce patient wait times and quicken communication between patient and provider, while features like electronic prescriptions help people receive medications much quicker. Some experts say that patient wait times can decrease by 22 percent with an EHR. (17)

4. Time and Money Saved

According to the American Journal of Managed Care (AJMC), **patients who use healthcare facilities with EHRs cost up to \$730 less to treat (per patient admission) than patients with paper-based providers.** (18) The cost savings is attributed to improved clinic efficiency and money saved on tests, prescriptions, and other supply needs.

Here are additional ways an EHR can save you time:

- Access patient records in seconds versus hunting down a paper file
- Avoid leaving voicemails and quicken communication through online messaging
- Instantly send information to pharmacies, patients, and insurance companies versus sending by mail
- Input data digitally, such as sorting and updating files, versus writing by hand or creating new documents

Having said this, one of the biggest barriers to EHR entry is adoption. Upfront, there will inevitably be time spent learning how to use the system, training staff, obtaining the right equipment (computers, iPads, etc), and other challenges that any new piece of technology creates.

However, the upfront cost seems to pay off, considering adoption rates have increased dramatically. Less than a decade ago, nine out of ten doctors in the U.S. updated their patients' records by hand. Yet as mentioned earlier, approximately 90 percent of office-based physicians nationwide are using EHRs. (19) While a myriad of reasons could be linked to this increase, one could infer that practitioners are seeing a positive return on investment.

Of course, in the grand scheme of things EHRs are still a relatively new asset in the healthcare industry. Not everyone has found success with it, nor does every facility have the means to adopt a new system without significantly disrupting workflows. **Yet adoption success typically depends on the software itself; there are over 1,100 EHR vendors that exist and that number continues to grow.** (20) It might feel easy to lump an EHR into one single entity that performs a strict set of tasks, yet different EHRs will likely have various success rates depending on the strength of the software, support team, user interface, and more.

5. Higher Quality of Care

Improved coordination, decision making, time saved, and happier patients all contribute to the result everyone wants to see: better patient outcomes. **It's unsurprising, therefore, to see a direct correlation between EHR use and higher quality of care.** Let's jump to a few findings:

When examining EHRs and chronic health care management, a study boldly stated that EHR use improved hepatitis C virus (HCV) screening rates among baby boomers. Investigating over 20,000 patients in a primary care setting, researchers found that HCV screening rates increased from 7.6 percent to 72 percent thanks to an EHR prompt. The alert also enabled 100 percent of newly-diagnosed patients to be referred to specialty care, with 67 percent of them receiving HCV treatment as a result. (21)

These powerful findings had a domino effect; researchers at the University of Michigan developed an EHR-based prompt in primary care clinics to encourage HCV screening and streamline care for patients diagnosed with the condition.

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Another study focused on diabetic patients found that over half in EHR-enabled practices received care that met endorsed standards, versus only 7 percent of patients at paper-based clinics. (22) Other research points to annual improvements in care that were up to 10 percent greater in clinics with EHRs versus ones that were paper-based. (23) **Best yet, data from the 2011 Physician Workflow found that 75 percent of physicians surveyed said an EHR enhanced overall patient care.** (24)

What This Means for Traditional Chinese Medicine

You might be asking: How does all of this data translate to practice management and patient care in acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)?

Just as we’ve seen in Western medicine, there is tremendous potential for a high-quality acupuncture software to help TCM practitioners transform their clinic – providing the highest standard of care while running a practice more smoothly.

With the right acupuncture practice management software designed for TCM, practitioners will have access to specific information and insights that would be non applicable on other EHRs. For example, with an EHR designed for TCM (like Unified Practice), you gain access to:

- Flexible SOAP note charting with auto-fill suggestions specific to TCM
- Inventory that syncs when you electronically compound formulas and prescribe herbs and supplements directly from SOAP notes
- Licensed reference databases specific to TCM to confirm terms, conditions, or protocols
- Time saving tools like insurance verification, online forms, and SMS reminders, which help benefit small or single-practitioner businesses

More specifically, having a patient’s medical history and previous treatment information at the touch of a button or swipe of a screen is invaluable as an acupuncturist. A powerful EHR will instantly tell you whether or not the patient has a history of fainting,

nausea, or headaches from past sessions. You'll be reminded if they are needle sensitive, responded well to one specific approach but not another, and of any unique concerns or preferences.

With an EHR, you have an accurate, accessible, and easy-to-read record of patient medications and allergies, too. This makes it easier to assess the risks of herb-drug interactions, allowing you to reference and find the right herbal prescription in a shorter period of time while reducing the risk of negative or even dangerous interactions.

All in all, practitioners want to focus on connecting with patients – and healing them. Acupuncture EHRs provide the opportunity to do this while simultaneously reducing any risks that may creep up and maintaining the highest standards of patient safety. It's a peace of mind that's hard to pass up.

Integration of Western and Eastern Medicine

As TCM becomes more prominent in the U.S., many people's health protocols include a blend of both Eastern and Western medicine. An integrative approach to health is becoming more and more common, with practitioners on both sides recognizing the numerous areas in which Chinese and Western medicine can engage in productive and collaborative research. [\(25\)](#)

In fact, it's normal for a patient to have a team of health professionals from both sides, ranging from a general practitioner and dermatologist to a chiropractor and acupuncturist. **It's a lot more feasible to speak with other healthcare professionals, share charts, and send records with an EHR.** Being able to utilize technology also reinforces the legitimacy and professionalism of TCM.

EHRs and Evidence-Based TCM

Aside from its practice management benefits, effective acupuncture software can collect, organize, and maintain a wide range of analyzable data. Patient demographics, vital signs, history of presenting illness, previous medical history, family history, treatment protocols, and most importantly, treatment responses, are all collected and codified in the software of EHRs. **Therefore, this technology has enormous potential to benefit the TCM industry because it can increase the evidence base through trillions of pieces of collected medical data.**

Since the inception and implementation of EHR technology, lawmakers, programmers, and scientists have anticipated the role that EHR data will play in future medical research. Laws regarding the use of EHRs (such as HIPAA and HITECH) have provided mechanisms by which this data is collected anonymously and catalogued for future research. This data can then be collected and maintained in the “Health Information Exchange” – databases that will allow researchers to conduct studies using clinical data without needing to perform RCTs. (26) A new field of research called Health Informatics takes computerized medical data and analyzes it for trends.

Acupuncture and TCM can benefit from the collection of clinical data. **In order for the industry to see this benefit, however, acupuncturists need to use EHRs so data can be collected and studies can be done showing the effectiveness of TCM.** If enough data is collected, research can display the effectiveness of acupuncture on specific conditions within certain patient populations and compare results against other medical modalities.

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What if the data could compare a cohort of low back pain patients who received acupuncture versus patients who received steroid injection therapy? If the information is available, it might show that acupuncture is just as, if not more effective, which would make TCM the standard of care prior to steroid injections.

Widespread adoption and use of acupuncture practice management software could contribute to this data and build the evidence base, with the hope to clinically demonstrate the effectiveness and efficacy of TCM.

How Unified Practice Can Help You

It would be hard to not mention Unified Practice in this report. While the aim of this piece is to show the science-backed benefits of an EHR, it’s also an opportune moment to explain why the Unified Practice EHR and practice management system is a great choice for TCM and acupuncture practitioners.

For starters, Unified Practice was built for acupuncture practitioners and TCM, and the software is flexible enough to work for other types of integrative medicine. Many of our teammates are also acupuncture practitioners and understand the unique challenges people in this field of work face. **They also work directly with our product team to ensure our software is constantly evolving and staying relevant as the industry grows.**

Many of our features are especially useful for TCM practitioners, such as a drawing tool to notate specific acupoints, templates (like a posterior scalp) to write on, and smart texting that knows Chinese herbs and supplements to avoid writing complex language all day long.

Unified Practice is also incredibly integrative, meaning any type of function your clinic might need is likely to link with the EHR software. Some of our top integrations include:

- One-click claim submission to Office Ally billing
- Constant Contact targeted email marketing (HIPAA complaint)
- Insurance verification tools

Lastly, the Unified Practice EHR and practice management software is HIPAA compliant, ensuring patient safety and practitioner conformity. In our system, a patient's information is stored in a HIPAA compliant SSAE 16 SOC 1 and SOC 2 data center. Data is always encrypted in transit over the internet and at rest when it is being stored or archived on our servers. Offsite backups are performed daily. Because Unified Practice is a cloud-based system, no information is stored locally on an iPad, computer, or phone.

Summary

While we might be biased, the research is overwhelming: **electronic health records have powerful potential to improve clinic operations and patient satisfaction, while saving time, increasing revenue, and supporting a higher quality of care delivery.**

With Unified Practice, we have found that the average practitioner who bills insurance and sees 40 patients per week can save 40 hours per month over paper charting. If you're interested in improving how your clinic runs while delivering better patient care,



we hope you give Unified Practice a try. **To learn more, [watch our demo](#) and see Unified Practice in action.**