

GE Healthcare

# Family Medical Specialists of Texas

Better Data for a Better Practice



*According to a recent Medical Group Management Association (MGMA) study,<sup>1</sup> medical practices with five or fewer physicians are the least likely to use electronic medical records (EMRs). Bucking that trend to install GE Healthcare's Centricity® Practice Management and EMR (formerly Centricity Physician Office), Family Medical Specialists of Texas found that the investment paid off in better patient care by leveraging data, a more efficient office, and reduced administrative costs. The practice was even able to use data from its Centricity EMR to negotiate a better contract with a major national insurer.*

"Increasingly, healthcare providers are being segregated into the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' – that is, those who have information technology and those who don't," says Christopher Crow, MD, MBA, and founder of Family Medical Specialists of Texas. "Too often, that's a function of size. Small practices don't have an IT department and the same access to capital as large groups. Even among large practices, too many aren't installing electronic medical records, or aren't taking full advantage of the systems they have."



l-r: Dr. Sander Gothard, Dr. Christopher Crow, and Dr. Matthew Weyenberg

*"We sat down with the insurance company and showed them what we were doing with the EMR data to help improve our level of care, and explained the NCQA Practice Connections certification. In the end, we negotiated a better contract than we could have without Centricity EMR."*

Christopher Crow, MD, MBA  
Family Medical Specialists of Texas

That's not an accusation anyone would make of Crow's three-physician practice, based in Plano, Texas. Family Medical Specialists uses a comprehensive IT system, built around GE Healthcare's Centricity Practice Management and EMR, to create a model of efficiency and great patient care. In fact, Family Medical Specialists is one of the first practices to be certified by the National Center for Quality Assurance (NCQA)'s Physician Practice Connections, part of the Bridges to Excellence quality program.



Dr. Crow explains, "Our practice focuses on two strategies: one, providing great customer service, and two, providing great health care. In order to accomplish those things, you must be efficient. And you have to be able to get information back out of the practice, which you can't do in a paper world."

### **Fastest implementation in the West**

When Dr. Crow and his partner Sander Gothard, MD, founded the practice in 2001, they thought they couldn't afford to install an EMR. "Looking back, I see we should have made the investment," he says now. Two years and 4,000 charts later, the partners were planning a move to a bigger office and decided it was time to implement a comprehensive healthcare IT system. They chose Centricity Practice Management and EMR, partly because of their experience with the original Millbrook and Logician products that underlay the Centricity software, and partly because it was a comprehensive, integrated system with excellent customer support.

In June 2003, Dr. Crow told GE he wanted the implementation finished in six weeks. This was a time when being a small practice worked to its advantage: with only two doctors, building consensus was easy, and the workflows were relatively uncomplicated. Both GE and the practice hustled through July, and the new Centricity system went live on August 15th.

The installation at Family Medical Specialists currently includes 22 workstations for 3 physicians and 7 support staff, including a workstation in every exam room. Centricity forms the core; in addition, the practice uses a lab interface, Advanced Disease Management (formerly Clinical Content Consultants) forms, and an interface with EKG and pulmonary function test machines. In addition, this practice uses a Patient Patient Portal to provide secure messaging with patients and specialists. The subscription e-mail service, which offers patients unlimited annual secure e-mail consultations for an annual fee, has proven a popular way for this family practice to distinguish itself.

In addition, this practice participates in the Medical Quality Improvement Consortium (MQIC), which provides data warehousing, off-site disaster recovery, advanced reporting capabilities, and a set of quality metrics identical to the NCQA's Bridges to Excellence program. Family Medical Specialists backs up its data on the remote MQIC servers every night. The doctors can then create reports from that MQIC data for patient care, research studies, or quality-improvement programs.

The task of loading 4,000 patient charts into the new Centricity EMR made Dr. Crow wish he had started the practice with electronic records. After some experimentation, the team settled on "just in time" loading of charts: not the night before, but truly just in time. "We started out entering information the night before, but realized that a lot of the data was no longer current," Dr. Crow explains. "So now we enter data during the visit. Our goal is to pull the chart only once. A year after we started, we have 3,000 of those original 4,000 paper charts done. The remaining thousand may never come back; they may have moved or changed insurance, for example. We're not creating a chart until we know that patient is coming back."

### It's not what you put in – it's what you get out

Where Family Medical Specialists really stands out from other practices, even from others with electronic records, is the way it uses data from the Centricity EMR to actively manage diseases and improve patient care.

"The endgame is being able to interact with patients seamlessly and cheaply about their care and the guidelines they need to achieve. We shouldn't rely on chance to spot potential health issues. Patients shouldn't have to come to the office for us to notice a problem," says Dr. Crow.

To provide more proactive care, this practice makes heavy use of the built-in Centricity EMR reporting module, in addition to custom reports. Using those custom reports, Dr. Crow can identify in just seconds every diabetic patient seen in the last two months; names of those with HbA1C results of 6.5 or more (a threshold set by the practice) are bolded. The doctors can also do rapid searches and a mail merge with Microsoft Word, a feature they used recently to notify patients of drug recalls.

Having standardized flow sheets and established internal metrics helped all the providers meet the same standard of care. The nurses can quickly see from the flow sheet whether a patient needs a blood test, for example. One thing this practice spotted after it began analyzing the data was that many of its diabetic patients weren't getting annual eye exams for retinopathy. Now they're more aware of the need to remind patients to get those exams – and the need to record such exams in this practice's own charts.

With Centricity, "more than one person can look at the chart at one time. If a patient calls with a question, I don't have to put her on hold to go find her records."

Dawn Sanchez, LVN  
Family Medical Specialists of Texas

"A lot of our results were a matter of collecting data," Dr. Crow explains, "but even more were a result of refocusing our efforts. Drawing your attention to an issue tends to improve your performance just because you're aware of it," Dr. Crow explains.

After building all these capabilities, Family Medical Specialists decided to become certified by the NCQA Physician Connections quality-improvement program. "We chose that program because it's the most widely recognized quality initiative," says Dr. Crow. "NCQA will probably set the standard." He believes that the countless different insurer pay-for-performance protocols will eventually be pulled to an outside standard and has placed his bet that it will resemble the NCQA program.

The Practice Connections certification also raises this practice's quality rating with a major national insurer. Dr. Crow says, "We sat down with the insurance company and showed them what we were doing with the EMR data to help improve our level of care, and we explained the NCQA Practice Connections certification. In the end, we negotiated a better contract than we could have without the Centricity EMR."

### The bottom line

Centricity Practice Management has given Family Medical Specialists both the ability to improve patient care and the ability to work efficiently. Dawn Sanchez, LVN, says she would never go back to working with paper charts. "First of all, I can read everyone's writing not just the doctors;' everyone's," she explains. "Second, more than one person can look at the chart at one time. If a patient calls with a question, I don't have to put her on hold to go find her records. Finally, the ability to fax prescriptions directly from the Centricity EMR saves a lot of time and eliminates a tremendous number of phone calls. In the first year alone, we sent more than 4,600 prescription faxes that we would otherwise have had to call in to pharmacies." (Proving how easy it is to retrieve data from the Centricity system, Sanchez found the number of prescription faxes in just a few keystrokes and less than five seconds.)

From the doctors' point of view, the biggest single feature of Centricity is the ability to have 7,000 charts in front of them at all times. "I can work from home, a train station, the beach, or the Colorado mountains," Dr. Crow says. "Nothing makes a practice more efficient than that. I can go out of town, respond to patients' calls with their charts right in front of me, and not face a big pile on my desk when I get back."

<sup>1</sup> "Research finds low EHR adoption rates for physician groups," Medical Group Management Association, September 8, 2005; <http://www.mgma.com/press/EHR-adoptionstudy.cfm>, accessed December 19, 2005.

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