

When Done Right, Mobile Access Helps Physicians Take Control of Their Jobs

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As busy medical professionals, we experience a lot of frustration trying to practice and manage the workday without easy access to all the information we need to make the best decisions for our patients. Staying connected to that information typically means longer hours at the clinic or home office, which eat away at any semblance of a personal life.

Each of us spent years independently searching for a remote access solution using mobile devices and medical software of various kinds, with mostly disappointing results. Problems ranged from spotty connectivity to awkward user interfaces to devices that were overloaded with too much information, or

that provided too little information to be of value.

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We and our colleagues have found a new software application from Chicago-based Allscripts that provides mobile access to our

electronic health records system via the Apple iPhone or BlackBerry Smartphones. The software, Allscripts Remote, connects us to real-time patient summary information as well as our task lists and daily schedules. It is fully integrated with our electronic records system (also from Allscripts), which means that any action we take—writing prescriptions, ordering drug refills, or reviewing our daily schedules—is sent directly into the patient records back at the office. We can also dictate clinical notes and document our calls through Allscripts Remote and the iPhone or BlackBerry. This solution increases our productivity, improves the level of care we provide patients, and lets us stay connected to critical patient data whenever and wherever we need it.

Having this information at our fingertips is significant in two specific ways: it enables us to deal effectively with emergency situations while on call and out of the office; and it helps us use our downtime during meetings, while traveling, and even at our kids' soccer games to "clear the decks" by taking care of mundane tasks and managing our schedules.

Allscripts Remote software for the iPhone, released in April, already is used by hundreds of physicians in more than 100 medical groups across the U.S. The BlackBerry version of the software was released in December but some of us used it in its beta form. According to Allscripts, physicians have used Allscripts Remote to help more than 10,000 patients, including sending more

than 100 patients to local emergency departments—a process that's simple to accomplish with built-in map search and the ability to send the patient's medical history along with physician notes to the ER via secure messaging or automated fax.

Many of the physicians at our practices who use mobile devices had already switched to the iPhone or BlackBerry before the Allscripts software became available. Each device has a stable platform and a user-friendly design that makes it easy to access, view, and enter information. The iPhone touchscreen is an important innovation that relieves us from pecking away at screen icons or keyboards with a stylus. And the iPhone's speech recognition software is far superior to previous iterations of text-to-speech applications. The many physicians who still avoid speech recognition software will appreciate the iPhone's landscape keyboard that can be used on the touchscreen to enter information. The BlackBerry QWERTY keyboard is even easier to use. Either way, data entry is far easier on an iPhone or BlackBerry than on older devices.

The Real World, Remotely

The best way to illustrate the power of Allscripts Remote for the iPhone and BlackBerry is to provide examples of how we have used it to increase productivity while simultaneously increasing patient safety and delivering better care.

Being on call and speaking with patients in the middle of night create a clinical danger zone. For one thing, we're tired and usually lying in bed, which makes it harder than normal to take a call from an anxious patient or parent. For another, most of the patients who call are not our own, so we're not familiar with their situations. In the past, we would use pen and paper to take notes during the conversations, review what information we had on hand and try to reach a clinical decision. Without being able to see the patient record, there

was always the danger that we would forget something—or the patient would forget to tell us something—that would have changed our decision.

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Now when we take calls in the middle of the night we can use our Smartphones to view the patient summary information in real time, while we're on the phone with the patient. Finding the patient's medical chart requires only that we sign into the system, authenticate ourselves (a safeguard against someone stealing the device), and enter all or part of the patient's name or phone number. The patient summary shows active medical problems, allergies, current medications and immunizations, social history, and values from the most recent lab tests. The data appear in reverse chronological order, so we see the most recent treatments first and can dig further if necessary.

Having the information on hand is critical because it means we no longer waste precious time asking questions about recent treatments or prescriptions. Many decisions can thus be made immediately—for example, when a mother called and said her son stepped on a rusty nail. Seeing that the child recently had had a tetanus shot meant that everyone could go back to bed.

Allscripts Remote has additional features that help get patients treated as quickly as possible. For example, the software automatically reminds us of the drugs that we typically prescribe for a specific diagnosis. Patients also appreciate that, before the prescription is transmitted, we can access a list of their preferred pharmacies and choose the most convenient one.

In a few instances, we have sent patients to an emergency department and used Allscripts Remote to prepare the ED staff in advance of the patient's arrival. Using speech recognition or our Smartphone's landscape keyboards, we've created notes from the call and sent those along with the patient summary to the ED physicians.

In one case, the mother of a six-month-old called on a Saturday afternoon and was concerned that her baby might have had a seizure. The baby had a number of unusual health conditions. Before she was taken to a local pediatric ED, the physician used Allscripts Remote to make the ED aware of these conditions before treating her. The software was used to create a note and send it along with the child's patient summary to the ED. With just that information and no further testing, the ED physicians were able to determine that the child had not had a seizure, after all.

Another example from our case files: a six-year-old complained of a headache and leg pain and needed to go to an ED. Her mother was very concerned that her daughter had encephalitis brought on by Lyme disease. This story also had a happy ending. The patient summary, including the child's recent test results, was sent to the ED where doctors determined it wasn't encephalitis, which avoided a series of invasive tests for the child and spared the parents several hours of needless worry. Importantly, both of these cases show the power of mobile EHR technology to limit duplicative testing and reduce overall healthcare costs.

While ED connectivity is one of Allscripts Remote's flashiest and most-appreciated capabilities, its more mundane functions are just as important. For instance, by enabling us to conduct and document a patient encounter remotely, we can record vital information while it's still fresh in our minds. Patient safety is improved because our documentation is completed

immediately and can be quickly shared with our care teams in the form of an electronic task. Like most physicians, we don't always go into the office the day following an after-hours encounter. But with Allscripts Remote, even if we're not available, our documentation is, and our staff will know whether a patient needs to complete a new lab test or drop by for an exam.

The application also increases legal safeguards by letting us complete our documentation quickly and accurately. On-call care is among the worst-documented care. After a long night with little sleep, we can sometimes forget key details of what we've done, or put off doing our documentation. Now, if legal questions arise, we don't have to rely on memory or sketchy notes written on a pad—the details are all captured in the EHR.

Making Downtime Work

Like all professionals, physicians endure a number of meetings with colleagues that often represent a significant productivity loss during our busy workdays. When we are in meetings, tasks are piling up and our schedules are changing as patients request or cancel appointments.

Allscripts Remote has enabled us to increase our productivity during downtime by working on our task lists and viewing real-time schedules. We've been able to chip away at administrative work by signing off on medication refill requests, reviewing and taking action on patient lab results, and handling incoming urgent items or recent e-mail from patients. In addition, while in transit to our offices, we can check whether a patient is in the waiting room for an appointment.

Tedious meetings are not the only type of downtime we face. Like other business people, we spend a fair amount of time traveling or waiting in airports during flight delays. In the past, we would pull out our laptops in these situations and try to get work done. But booting

up a laptop and getting connected to the EHR was hit or miss.

Now when we have 20 minutes in an airport, 10 minutes in a coffee shop, or even a few spare minutes during vacation, we can pull out our iPhone or BlackBerry and immediately access our task lists and schedules, make calls, send secure messages, and review clinical information.

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We can also use Allscripts Remote to provide that personal touch so important to patients. How? When answering service calls are sent directly to our Smartphone, the application converts the list of phone numbers to hyperlinks that we can click to immediately call a patient back. Simultaneously, we can pull up the patient's summary and ensure that there are no underlying medical conditions or other factors that might require treatment beyond bed rest and lots of fluids.

Taking Control

Practicing medicine is a great responsibility that requires a number of personal sacrifices. We're willing to sacrifice a little of our personal lives for the rewards it brings. But it is truly wonderful when a mobile access tool comes along to mitigate those demands and enable us to reclaim some of that personal time.

Allscripts Remote for the iPhone and BlackBerry has made it possible to conduct our practice and manage our workdays from remote locations. The application has avoided numerous situations where having little or no information would have led to clinical inefficiency, wasted time, and increased stress.

The bottom line is that access to the right data and the ability to use

that data effectively enable us to focus on the task at hand and take control of our time. Minimizing disruptions to our personal lives and maximizing the productivity of our professional lives have helped us enjoy both a little more.

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