

How the Apple Watch (with a Little Help from AI) Can Save Doctors Time

Electronic health records (EHRs) may be ubiquitous in the healthcare landscape, but that doesn't mean they're necessarily making physicians' lives easier.

Dr. Manish Naik is chief medical information officer at Austin Regional Medical Clinic in central Texas. He told Healthcare IT News that EHRs actually can serve more as obstacles than aids to doctors since they require them to spend a great deal of time, in total, on entering data.

Does typical EHR protocol make doctors “the most highly trained data entry clerks in the world”?

“The user interface is suboptimal and clunky, leading to increased cognitive load,” Naik said. “Physicians are acting as the most highly trained data entry clerks in the world to complete many of their EHR workflows. To cope with these challenges, physicians have begun to bring the EHR into the exam room with their patients, taking focus away from the patient.”

Therefore it should be no surprise that Austin Regional — with more than two dozen facilities in ten Texas cities — has been on the hunt for a way to make EHR use more efficient and effective and, at the same time, make way for more focused, hands-on time with patients.

What might be surprising is the device proposed to achieve that result . . . the popular Apple Watch.

Voice recognition program allows doctors to dictate findings into Apple Watch

Artificial Intelligence (AI), machine learning, speech recognition, and natural language processing . . . they're all employed in healthcare vendor Notable Health's tech platform to assist physicians in documenting discussions with patients and seamlessly adding them to EHRs. And the Apple Watch is the vehicle for that delivery system.

“The software assists with physician documentation because the physician can simply dictate their findings into the Apple Watch before, during and after a visit,” Naik told Healthcare IT News. “Simply by stating the section that is being dictated, such as ‘History or ‘physical exam,’ the technology places the text in the correct section of the note.”

Those worried about AI supplanting human quality control will be reassured to learn that the workflow includes physician review of the AI-generated note; the doctor also will electronically sign the note in the EHR.

Additionally, Notable Health's technology can be aligned with the practice's specific operating systems. In Austin Regional's case, Notable's tech is integrated with the Epic EHR system used by physicians so that routine workflow — like coding and ordering — is also streamlined and made more efficient.

Because technology of this sort is only as good as its application in real life, the true test comes in its day-to-day usefulness. Just so far, six months into the use of AI-via-Apple Watch, Naik gives Notable's technology high marks when it comes to usefulness in the field, both in implementing the technology and in supporting it.

“Incredibly, while the software is integrated on top of our Epic EHR, going live with Notable Health required very little work from

our internal IT and EHR teams,” Naik said. “At the onset, we certainly were skeptical that the software would be able to integrate so seamlessly with Epic. But Notable Health’s team did all of the heavy lifting for us, and we were able to go live within a couple weeks of signing the contract with them.”

Physicians at Austin Regional credit the technology with saving them on average between one and two hours per day, hours they would have otherwise spent on documenting doctor-patient discussions in EHRs.

A reduction in workload means a lower likelihood of physician burnout

Naik explained to Healthcare IT News that that recovered time adds up in a big way in the lives of doctors. “This improved efficiency has also led to decreased symptoms of burnout from EHR documentation. Physicians have reported that they are able to see more patients throughout the day, focus more on their patients during office visits, and still leave the office earlier to spend more time with their families.”

Obviously this success story has major implications for data collection in the healthcare field at large. Naik warns that doctors often feel overwhelmed by typical EHR platforms. He suggests that providers look into novel methods — including AI — for reducing that burden and thereby reducing burnout . . . a state that doesn’t only impact doctors.

“The effects of these burnout symptoms extend across an organization,” Naik said, “from the clinical staff that works with the patients to the front desk team to the billing and coding organizations.”

At the present time, over 30 Austin Regional physicians are using the Notable tech platform in their practices: surgeons, orthopedic specialists, family medicine practitioners, rheumatologists, cardiologists, and obstetricians and gynecologists, to name a few. Naik reports that more doctors are joining the AI collaboration each week.

So when you see a physician sporting an Apple Watch, it very well may be that they’re doing more than tracking time: they’re saving it.

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