6 PROVEN WAYS TO EXTEND THE VALUE OF YOUR EHR
Introduction

Electronic health records (EHRs) have proliferated across the U.S. over the past decade, and have enabled caregivers to make well-informed treatment decisions more quickly and safely by providing more complete patient information. While EHRs are excellent repositories of patient data, and are able to transform that data to actionable information, they aren’t ideal tools for proactively sharing that actionable information in time-sensitive scenarios. This eBook will explore why EHRs do not solve the challenges of clinical communication and collaboration, and outline the benefits of an integrated, enterprise-wide communication platform for all members of your organization.

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EHR use has nearly permeated all hospitals in the U.S.: 96 percent of non-federal acute care hospitals have adopted a certified EHR system according to the most recent report on the subject from the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology. Yet, while EHR adoption is “nearly universal,” there is still much work to be done, and many hospitals and health systems are engaged in ongoing optimization efforts. This usually involves first doing remediation of technical flaws, then moving on to improving performance through enhancing capabilities and standardizing processes. While there is much hospitals and health systems can do with their EHRs to improve interoperability and advance the shift to value-based care models, EHRs were not designed to address one critical area of care delivery: clinical communication and collaboration.

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*The EHR’s Role in Collaboration Between Providers: A Qualitative Study*  
*AMIA Annual Symposium Proceedings*
The EHR plays four primary roles in the hospital: a repository, a messenger, an orchestrator, and a monitor. An EHR imparts tremendous value as a repository of patient information: It provides a common dataset that can speed and simplify communications. However, while the data is there, the EHR functions much better as a system of record than as a system of communication. EHRs have actually expanded the number of communication channels available to clinicians. The most popular EHR vendors all support secure email, messages within the EHR that can be attached to patient records, and pop-ups or general broadcast notices. Some EHR vendors have even branched out into real-time secure chat applications accessible within the system.

While researchers of the aforementioned study concluded that this variety of communication channels within the EHR were largely considered easy to use by caregivers, these channels were considered less effective than other methods. Communication practices within the EHR were not uniform, and clinicians found that the communication channels made it “difficult to give feedback and clarify, which could take more, rather than less time.” Most troubling, researchers often heard about the “communication illusion,” which occurred when clinicians thought they were communicating, but really weren’t. For example, a physician may send a copy of a note and assume the recipient would continue the care plan, but the recipient may not find the plan in the EHR or may misunderstand it. “You need to have that person communicate with the primary doctor...and then have them assume that responsibility and acknowledge it.” When immediate response is required, as is often the case in coordinating patient care, a note or chat within the EHR is not the best course of action.
The system of communication

The research indicates that intra-EHR communication is less than ideal for effective care coordination. While the communication channels in the EHR serve specific functions, like submitting orders and documenting patient encounters for members of the care team to reference, they cannot serve all purposes. And that is where an enterprise clinical communication platform that complements the EHR comes in. More healthcare leaders are realizing that both systems—the EHR and a complementary communication platform—are necessary.

In the healthcare environment, people and technology need to communicate flawlessly to speed response times and keep safety and satisfaction at the forefront. A robust, fully integrated healthcare communications platform fills the communication and collaboration gaps within the EHR by connecting care teams and systems to improve workflows and deliver information quickly and securely into the hands of those who need to act on it. Let’s take a look at six specific ways a clinical communication platform can extend the value of the EHR in your organization.
Support all members of the care team (clinical and non-clinical)

One of the downfalls of the EHR when it comes to care team corroboration is that most don’t actually support all members of the care team. The only people who have access to the communication tools within the EHR are those who possess login credentials to the system, which may exclude some key roles. A true enterprise clinical communication platform supports all roles and people within the health system, even if they don’t have credentials following their name or access to the EHR. One study found that patients see an average of 18 healthcare professionals, defined as doctors, nurses, and allied health workers, during their hospitalization. When this is broadened to include all hospital employees, the number of people the average patient sees rises to 60. This broader group often includes staff members from transport, environmental services, food services, and so on—all of the people who touch a patient’s experience. As care teams grow to be larger and more diverse, it’s increasingly important that communications encompass everyone on the entire spectrum of care. A clinical communication platform provides messaging tools not just for one or two stakeholders, but for everyone involved with caring for the patient.
2 Provide an enterprise-wide directory to serve as the source of truth

When contact and schedule information is not readily accessible, or becomes inaccurate because the information is stored and maintained by multiple departments, critical messages related to patient care can go to the wrong person. At best, this is inefficient. At worst, this could be life-threatening if the communication breakdown causes a delay in treatment or prevents fast response. A clinical communication platform makes the contact information of all staff readily accessible by maintaining a single enterprise-wide, web-based directory to serve as the source of truth for the entire facility or organization. This enables staff to log on anywhere, anytime to perform a variety of important updates to contact information, search the directory, and send important messages. By having a single source of truth, healthcare organizations are motivated to make sure it stays up to date, and they also have the ability to make available different types of information to different roles within the organization. For example, perhaps doctors’ home phone numbers are only listed for fellow physicians. Additionally, the directory can house more than just contact information: It can also include preferences. For example, a physician may have the preference to receive messages on her smartphone first, then escalate to her pager if she doesn’t respond.

Once again, this is more inclusive than the directory contained within the EHR, which only lists the contact information for registered users, and even that information may not be current (and as such, may not be a regularly referenced source by staff). If a physician or nurse needs to contact someone who is not in the EHR directory, they need to find another source to obtain that information—another system or a colleague. This wastes valuable time and can cause communication breakdowns. A single enterprise-wide, web-based directory that is updated in real time prevents care team members from relying on multiple sources of contact information and helps quickly connect them to the person they need at that moment.
Offer on-call schedule integration and clinician status

Similar to contact information, it’s often critical that care team members can quickly find on-call schedule information, so that they reach out to a colleague who is readily available. Yet on-call schedule integration and clinician status are not built into EHR systems. A few EHR vendors plan to add this functionality down the road, however; we’re not aware of one that has it today. Many hospitals and health systems rely on spreadsheets, which may have multiple versions with conflicting information. Others use paper copies that become outdated immediately after they’re printed. Physicians’ schedules are complex and constantly change. It’s no wonder then, that 61 percent of physicians express concerns about having access to colleagues and specialists, and 53 percent of nurses cite difficulties determining which physician is available.  

A centralized, web-based on-call schedule that is readily accessible by all who need to reference it enables staff to reach caregivers by role and on-call schedule.
Support multiple devices

All of the large EHR vendors have released mobile apps, so EHR users can quickly access information from their mobile device instead of relying on PC access. Whether or not a health system supports a BYOD environment, they should allow their staff who have mobile devices to communicate whenever and wherever they are. All members of the care team should be able to access and manage critical information quickly without being logged into a desktop.

A true enterprise clinical communication platform is multi-modal and offers the flexibility care teams want and need. With support for secure messaging, voice, alarms, and alerts across end-user devices, including smartphones, pagers, and Wi-Fi phones, caregivers can receive messages that are initiated by the operator, staff members via the web, patient monitoring systems, and other sources—and receive them on their device of choice.
5 Integrate with third-party systems

From a communications standpoint, EHR vendors recognize that they cannot be the experts in communication, so they support integration and interoperability through standards such as HL7 and the use of APIs. EHRs do have some inherent information-sharing capabilities between their communication tools and the patient record, but this connection alone is not enough. Care team members rely on a variety of systems and data sources as they go through their workflows, and information exchange or interoperability is critical to speeding and enhancing those workflows.

With a clinical communication platform, caregivers can receive messages from systems such as nurse call, patient monitoring, and many others on their mobile devices. This allows key clinical information based on events (receipt of critical lab results, admission or discharge messages, new orders) to be sent to the end user’s device of choice. For example, a sepsis response use case: A clinical communication platform can take an EHR’s sepsis alert or a critical test result and automatically deliver it to the right clinicians, often a sepsis rapid response team, on their mobile devices. The alert includes the clinical context they need to act right away, including who the patient is, which room they’re in, and their MEWS score. The alert is sent in just seconds, enabling the care team to respond in minutes. This automated workflow promotes swift response and allows sepsis treatment to begin quickly, potentially preventing tissue and organ damage, or even organ failure and patient death. Ultimately, being able to reach mobile team members within seconds of a critical alert improves overall workflow, staff productivity, and the comfort and safety of everyone in your facility.
Let’s say your hospital is experiencing an event that many people need to be informed of as soon as possible—it could be an armed intruder, a natural disaster, an influx of patients, or a Code Blue. Your staff depends on fast, accurate notification of critical information on the right communication devices to prepare them and to ensure their safety in the event of an emergency. An enterprise healthcare communications platform equips you to do just that: You can send messages to all staff or select particular groups to deliver critical information around events.

For example, you might send a severe weather message to all staff, a Code STEMI alert to the STEMI response team, and a Code Blue notification only to on-call clinicians on that floor. All recipients receive that message on their preferred device and can quickly perform the actions outlined in the message, as previously determined when the response process was established. Additionally, it’s not just about sending the message out: An enterprise clinical communication platform promotes accountability because the individuals notified need to acknowledge the message quickly so escalations can be managed and the desired response happens. EHR systems currently have no way of managing emergency notifications in this manner.
The bottom line

There is no denying that EHR systems have been tremendous investments by hospitals and health systems across the country, and they’ve effectively ushered healthcare into the digital age. While they offer myriad benefits to patient care, one key area where the EHR falls short is clinical communication and collaboration, especially for information that needs to be acknowledged and acted on quickly. Healthcare organizations need a complementary system that enables messaging and collaboration among all members of the care team to support the real-world communication needs of physicians, nurses, and the organization overall.

Enterprise healthcare communication platform checklist:

- Patient-centered conversations
- Support for all staff members (clinical and non-clinical)
- Enterprise directory available to all
- On-call schedule integration and clinician status
- Support for multiple devices
- Support for third-party system integrations
- Emergency notifications
- Real-time notifications
- HIPAA compliance
- Delivery receipts
- Audit trail
- Push notifications on smartphones, smartwatches
ABOUT SPOK, INC.

Spok, Inc., a wholly owned subsidiary of Spok Holdings, Inc. (NASDAQ: SPOK), headquartered in Springfield, Virginia, is proud to be the global leader in healthcare communications. We deliver clinical information to care teams when and where it matters most to improve patient outcomes. Top hospitals rely on the Spok Care Connect® platform to enhance workflows for clinicians, support administrative compliance, and provide a better experience for patients. Our customers send over 100 million messages each month through their Spok® solutions. Spok is making care collaboration easier.

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