

Case Study >>>

High-volume eye care provider says goodbye to paper charts, hello to productivity and cost savings.

As one of the nation's premier eye care centers, EANM strives to operate at the top of its game at all times. Early this decade, however, the provider recognized it was operating with a significant liability: its paper-based patient records.

EANM found a solution in the comprehensive and customizable NextGen EHR. Practice staff and physicians were impressed with the specialty-specific content the NextGen Healthcare solution offered. And with an established base of customers in the ophthalmology and optometry fields, NextGen Healthcare demonstrated its viability as a long-term player in the eye care industry. By adopting NextGen EHR—and later the company's enterprise practice management system, NextGen EPM—EANM has been able to cut targeted costs and improve care delivery.

As a far-reaching organization with 14 clinical locations around the state, EANM found managing paper charts to be extremely challenging. In some cases a patient's record consisted of an original chart combined with faxed copies of notes accumulated at other offices. "We simply did not have good access to patient information," according to Dr. Greg Ogawa, EANM's chief medical officer (CMO).

Overview

PRACTICE

Ophthalmology and optometry practice
Albuquerque, NM

PRACTICE PROFILE

Founded in 1976, Eye Associates of New Mexico (EANM) has evolved into one of the largest comprehensive eye care practices in the United States. Forty ophthalmologists and optometrists provide a full range of services in 14 clinic locations statewide.

BUSINESS PROBLEM

With practice locations spread across the state, EANM found it difficult to have paper charts available for each patient visit. Providers desired better access to accurate information. The group likewise wanted to better manage costs. It anticipated that an EHR system could reduce costs of creating and maintaining paper charts, as well as reclaim square footage from chart storage.

SOLUTION

EANM implemented NextGen® EHR and NextGen® EPM software. The NextGen system exhibited a more extensive eye care knowledge base than other providers, and the templates could be easily modified to optimize quality and productivity.

PRODUCT DISTINCTIONS

- Specialty-specific content
- Ready access to comprehensive patient information
- Customization to match practice preferences and workflow
- Optimal code selection
- Integration with practice management system
- Stable, proven vendor

BENEFITS

- Increased productivity and organizational efficiency
- Improved access to patient information
- Enhanced documentation at the point of care
- Decreased costs related to dictation, paper records, manual processes
- Better charge capture
- Ability to dedicate more office space to revenue-generating activities

NEXTGEN
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By 2002, EANM realized that if it were to remain one of the western United States' top providers, it would need to embrace trends seen in the broader healthcare industry and automate its patient records. "We knew we needed to move to an EHR system. We watched product availability for years before finding that NextGen software offered a level of functionality that would allow us to start the transition from paper to electronic patient records," Dr. Ogawa said.

Past encounters with available technologies demonstrated at clinical meetings and trade shows left EANM medical staff less than impressed, however. "When it came to something that would work well for an organization of our size and sophistication, we needed a very robust system," recalled Dr. Ogawa. "But most products for the eye care industry were tailored to small practices."

Ogawa and his colleagues eventually came across a solution that stood out from the rest of the pack: NextGen EHR. "We saw what NextGen software offered in terms of functionality for an eye care practice such as ours and realized it could be a valuable asset," Dr. Ogawa recalled. Nonetheless, EANM wanted to compare NextGen Healthcare solutions with other EHR providers on equal footing, and in 2003 prepared a request for proposal (RFP) to gather information about prospective vendors and their solutions. Specifically, they wanted to identify:

1. Stable companies that would be around in 10 to 15 years
2. Products with applications specific to ophthalmology and optometry—or at the very least could be customized to handle the nuances of an eye care practice
3. Technology that was compatible with EANM operational and technical environment, including interoperability with a practice management system.

The practice formed a cross-functional steering committee that spent six months soliciting input from EANM doctors and staff at the various locations. "We immersed ourselves in the entire clinical workflow to identify how it all affected a patient's health record," said Project Manager Rosita Marquez.

From its research, EANM developed a list of benefits it expected from an EHR, including:

- Improved customer service
- Enhanced documentation at the point of care
- Reduced material and storage requirements
- Greater clinician and staff productivity
- Increased revenue with optimized coding
- Improved regulatory reporting and compliance
- Better quality and timeliness of care

After reviewing the proposals, EANM narrowed its search to two finalists and had each vendor perform on-site product demonstrations. Ever closer to making its decision, EANM then conducted two site visits with NextGen EHR ophthalmology clients to see the system in action.

The visits proved especially beneficial, not only exhibiting how an EHR could effectively function in a similar environment, but also providing EANM with some additional ideas on how it could structure its EHR to improve workflow. Armed with this information, the steering committee had seen more than enough proof that NextGen EHR was the right solution.



Structured roll-out, user buy-in facilitate transition to electronic records

With full board-of-directors' support, implementation of NextGen EHR commenced in mid-2005 at the first clinic location. EANM considered its roll-out options and decided that, due to its large size and many widespread locations, the organization would first deploy the EHR software in a pilot clinic—a smaller, but relatively high volume location.

"We followed NextGen Healthcare's recommendation to deploy the EHR software to additional clinics in phases," recalled EANM CIO Lee Werner. Five additional facilities came online in 2005, each one rolling out the system to front-office and patient services staff in Phase 1, eye care technicians in Phase 2, and doctors in Phase 3.

Similarly, training was conducted in phases with NextGen Healthcare educating a core group of about 10 individuals who went on to perform internal training at each facility. Before the system went live, everyone at a clinic, including doctors, spent time with the system in a simulated environment prior to using it with live patients.

With great foresight, EANM knew it needed full clinician buy-in for the EHR system to be successful. It made sure that doctors were represented on the implementation committee to help build trust and bridge the gap for physicians who relied so heavily on paper charts. "We adopted a motivating approach," Marquez recalled. "We were there every step of the way to see them through the transition."

And, in what leadership considers one of its wisest decisions of all, EANM concluded implementation at clinics with some of the highest productivity doctors where the transition to EHR needed to be the most efficient. They could not afford to have anything but the most optimized implementation at those sites. If those had been selected as early-implementation sites and if "hiccups" had occurred, the entire conversion could potentially have been derailed.

Armed with lessons learned in the first months of roll out, EANM was able to deploy NextGen EHR to the remaining clinics in 2006, becoming more efficient with each and every location. The provider organization went on to implement NextGen Healthcare's EPM in May 2008, creating a common IT platform that allows the seamless flow of patient financial and clinical data.

"NextGen Healthcare's ophthalmology-specific applications provide a good starting point for doctors to document standard examinations in the EHR. Combined with our own customizations, we're more productive and streamlined than ever before."

Greg Ogawa, MD
Chief Medical Officer

Intuitive workflow boosts provider productivity

EANM boasts a number of benefits with NextGen EHR. Intuitive workflow, an integrated eye care knowledge base, and subspecialty templates have all been designed to improve physician productivity and decision-making. "NextGen Healthcare's ophthalmology-specific applications provide a good starting point for doctors to document standard exams in the EHR," stated Dr. Ogawa. "Combined with our own customizations, we're more productive and streamlined than ever before."

For example, optometrists—who generally see patients with healthier eyes—can fully document the many normal aspects of the eye exam much more efficiently with a template EANM specifically developed for optometric practice compared to writing it out by hand. "As a result, these were the first providers in the organization to enthusiastically accept and directly benefit from the system," according to Dr. Ogawa.

With the EHR's ability to generate all the same kinds of documentation found in a paper record (such as chart notes, consultation letters and reports to primary care physicians), EANM doctors have essentially done away with dictation. Not only does this save substantial physician time, but it cuts down on transcription, printing, mailing, forms, and filing expenses, according to CIO Werner.

The eye care center also anticipates NextGen EHR will help improve coding practices, including verification of coding accuracy and perhaps even facilitating coding at optimized levels. With an in-house coding template, EANM can export diagnosis and exam codes for a patient directly to the EPM for billing, rather than relying on time-consuming manual input methods that introduce the potential for keying errors.

"With integrated EHR and EPM systems, for example, we are better able to capture our lab charges," Marquez stated. "When this was done manually, a diagnostic test would sometimes not get adequately documented and coded, which resulted in a lack of reimbursement for those tests."

Often overlooked, the expenses associated with simply creating a paper chart proved colossal to an organization of EANM's size. The organization estimated that the physical materials that comprised each patient's chart cost about \$2.25 plus the cost of labor to assemble the chart materials. When that was multiplied by 40,000, the typical number of new patients EANM would see annually, the expenses mounted quickly—\$90,000 a year just for the materials.

Since the initial deployment of the NextGen Healthcare system, EANM opened a 38,000-square-foot eye care center in Albuquerque, its largest facility to date. "This location is unique because it was designed without a chart room," Werner stated. "As a result, our cost-per-square-foot savings over the life of the building will be huge."

And by converting paper chart storage space at other offices into labs and exam rooms, EANM has transformed fallow areas into productive space to help increase patient volume and revenue.

By cutting down on or eliminating all activities associated with manual documentation such as ongoing chart maintenance, paper record storage requirements, and transcription costs, EANM estimates it has incrementally achieved savings.

These results, as well as EANM's pioneering attitude, have helped forge a bond between EANM and NextGen Healthcare that won't be easily broken. "Going forward, we'd like to work closely with NextGen Healthcare on a number of initiatives, to take what we've learned and created, and share it with them in a way that might be used to benefit their future clients," Dr. Ogawa concluded.


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