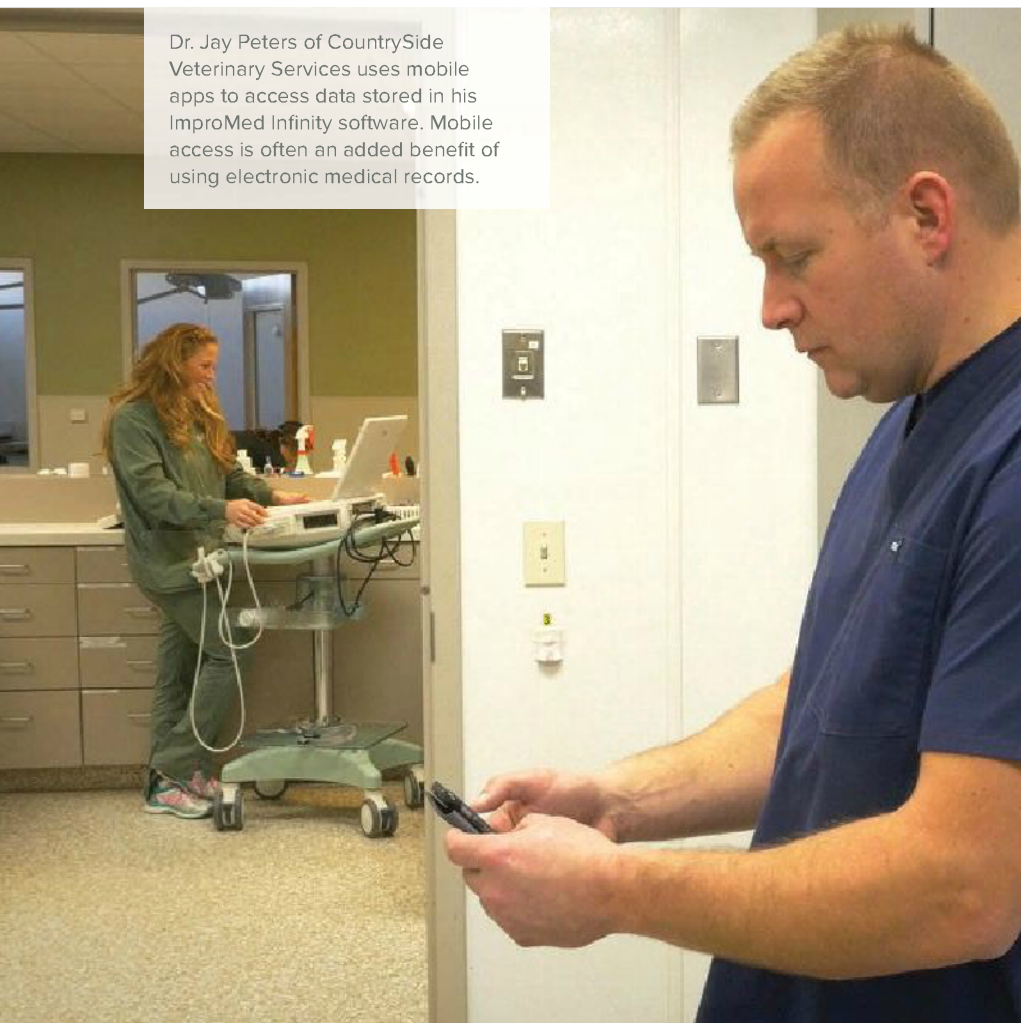


Digital Dilemma

Are you ready to say goodbye to paper for patient records?

by Maureen Blaney Flietner

Dr. Jay Peters of CountrySide Veterinary Services uses mobile apps to access data stored in his ImproMed Infinity software. Mobile access is often an added benefit of using electronic medical records.



Shelves and cabinets stuffed with manila folders. Unstuck sticky notes. Illegible handwriting. Ah, the good old days of patient veterinary medical records. Or, in many cases, the present day.

Switching patient medical information and client communications from paper to electronic veterinary medical records (EVMRs) is slowly becoming accepted in the United States. That could be because of the transition to practice information management systems (PIMS) that electronically handle the details of the broader business operations.

But veterinary practices apparently like to keep a foot in each world, according to one small study. Published in the August 1, 2014, edition of the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, the study looked at veterinary hospitals' use of EVMR systems. It found that of 82 practices in Massachusetts, 63.4% used a combination of electronic and paper records, 17.1% used EVMRs only, and 19.5% used paper records only.

Eleven veterinarians in the paper-only practices indicated that they anticipated technological problems, were concerned about time constraints, and figured that cost would be a barrier.

“Practices might take a first step to adopting electronic records by focusing on the client/patient record and patient vital signs.”

—MIKE ERICKSON

Today those concerns and others—including the need for safeguards to ensure the authenticity of electronic records—may be holding back some practices. However, others are enjoying the benefits.

Is this the time to switch?

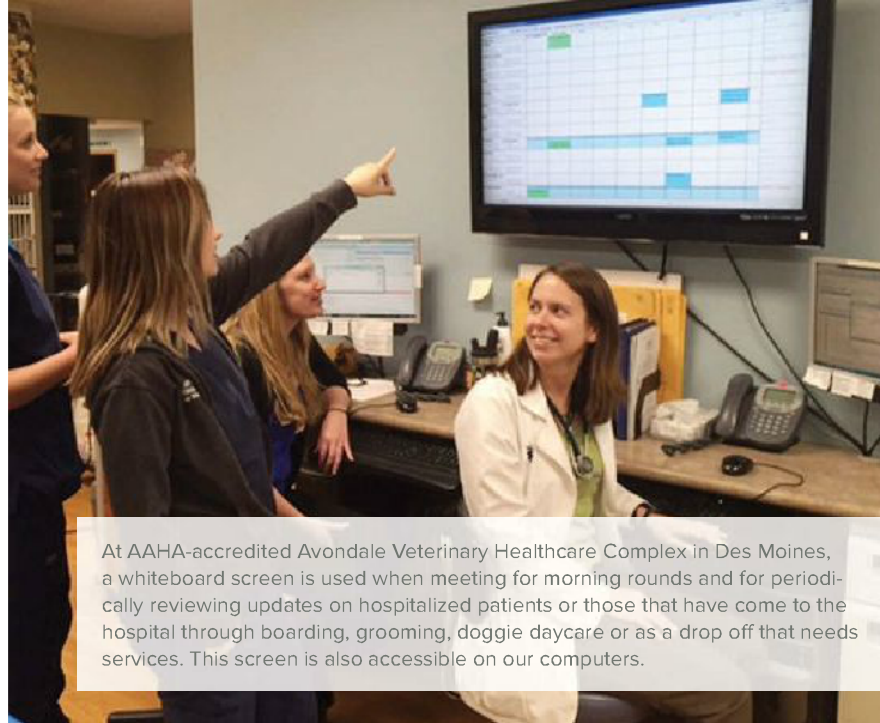
Dennis D. Woodruff, DVM, owner of Avondale Veterinary Healthcare Complex, an AAHA-accredited eight-doctor practice in Des Moines, Iowa, says his complex last used written medical records nine years ago. He fondly recalled the time when he could write a note, initial it, and put it into a patient's file.

"You did not have to go to the computer, open medical records, and look for the right tab," he explains, noting that he finds EVMRs cumbersome, although he does see some benefits.

"Key clicks—that's one of my concerns," he notes. "Yes, you can have more complete records as long as you fill in all the blanks. The trade-off is the time it takes to get that done."

Woodruff says the system has had virus issues, taking the practice down for a day, "which was absolutely terrible. We have backup support and we try to have redundant records, but it seems there is always something new coming, always a concern. In addition, you're continually upgrading and adding different modules. It doesn't make it any less complex."

Woodruff says the veterinarians there find typing on a computer in the exam room and making sure they are on the right form to be a bit obtrusive and impersonal. The doctors don't feel they can communicate as well



At AAHA-accredited Avondale Veterinary Healthcare Complex in Des Moines, a whiteboard screen is used when meeting for morning rounds and for periodically reviewing updates on hospitalized patients or those that have come to the hospital through boarding, grooming, doggie daycare or as a drop off that needs services. This screen is also accessible on our computers.

with the client, he says. They would rather write notes and transcribe at the end of the day.

However, Woodruff also sees advantages to EVMRs, even though it took two to three months "before we felt doggone comfortable with it."

"It is good for capturing patient charges," he said. "We also don't have to try to read someone else's writing. We don't have issues of not being able to find a patient's records because someone has it on their desk. Being able to import photos—lumps and bumps pics—into a file is nice. Before, we had to print pictures and put them in the folder."

In Valdosta, Ga., the one-doctor AAHA-accredited Animal Health Center has been using EVMRs for 20 years, but owner Tad Moseley, DVM, says he's been very pleased that he made the switch two years ago to a more modern system from eVetPractice.

"The conversion was fairly simple and was done over a weekend," he explains. "It required time from me for

set up, but not my staff. We all picked it up very quickly and were back at full speed in about three days. We did not convert our old records. We are going to allow them to slowly disappear by attrition."

Moseley says he found the biggest benefits of the new system to be user-friendliness and the time it takes to learn it. Integration with lab and radiology equipment, plus technical support also have been important.

For record-authenticity safeguards, all users must be logged in to access the medical record, says Moseley. Each employee has a unique username and password, and passwords are changed frequently to protect access. Each time a staff member makes an entry, it is recorded who was logged in at the time, he explains. Lockouts can be customized to what users want or what their state law requires. This makes the record unchangeable after a certain period.

Moseley says his EVMR system is cloud-based so "not having to maintain our own servers or equipment has been wonderful. We were

initially worried about being so tied to internet service, but it has not been a very big problem at all. I was assured the cloud-based operator was adequately backed up and that we actually retained ownership of the records as well.”

CountrySide Veterinary Services in Appleton, Wis., began EVMR integration into its PIMS software in October 2014. “We had stacks of shelves with reams of paper for each client, all of their information, referral records, previous clinic information, our veterinary notes. Our reception and technical staff drove this conversion because they wanted to be dedicated to client care, not dedicated to finding records,” says Jay Peters, DVM, co-owner.

It took about eight months working with ImproMed to customize EVMR modules, Peters notes. CountrySide uses both tablets and laptops, and the practice configured several buttons under its medical records tab so that exam data can be entered, previous history scrolled, charges captured, and a list of potential products shown if treatment is needed.

Old records were scanned as JPEG files so that veterinarians can quickly scroll through photos of previous history before writing a new record, Peters notes. Scanning old records using text recognition software wasn’t possible because of problems with individual handwriting.

Peters says veterinary technicians enter the lion’s share of information while with the veterinarian and client in a wellness visit or basic exam. Each morning, a list of clients each veterinarian will see is printed out so

records can be reviewed for the day. The practice also has integrated veterinary texts into the system to make their use as efficient as possible.

For some practices using a full room to store paper files, an additional exam room could be created out of that space.

To handle the need for record authenticity, says Peters, “there is a short lockout period—sometimes too short—and the operator must log in with the password. Upon leaving the workstation, everyone must log out. All records that are edited show changes, including what was edited, changed, or deleted.”

Since surgery on his arm made typing difficult, Peters also started to use Dragon Veterinary speech recognition software. He says it integrates well with the system. The only problems, he says, come when he mumbles or speaks too fast, but the system learns the user’s voice and word choice habits.

Peters has found added benefits in having records backed up locally and in the cloud. He employs a mobile app to access information from his phone at home or in the operating room. Peters also likes a mobile addition, built for ambulatory practices, that can be used if there is a power outage. He can pull up needed information, and new data added during the outage can be resynced to the main database when power is restored.

“EVMRs have improved our efficiency,” says Peters. “We expect savings moving forward in receptionist, tech, and doctor time as well as

benefits in workplace quality of life and happiness. The ultimate goal was to make a professional record that would detail the good medicine we were doing, enabling our clients

to see and read it, and to capture all charges and incidentals.”

Those considering making the switch to EVMRs may find that their first critical step is an initial discovery process of the current system, says Hallie Detjen, general manager of Henry Schein Animal Health Practice Solutions, North America, provider of the AVImark and ImproMed practice management software platforms. Depending on the practice’s size and complexity as well as which software platform is used, the practice’s lead for the conversion project will need to review current workflow, assess available software features, and put together a plan with assistance from the software provider.

Now is the time to make the switch, says Mike Erickson, vice president and general manager of IDEXX Veterinary Software & Services. “Our joint research with AAHA on key success factors for veterinary practices showed that the most successful practices are leveraging software technology to improve the patient, client, and staff experience.”

“If the practice’s goal is to simply move from paper records and charts to electronic records, the learning curve can be modest. Practices might take a first step to adopting electronic



Dr. Jay Peters (background) of CountrySide Veterinary Services uses ImproMed Infinity to manage his practice. Since going paperless last year, he and his staff enjoy a completely seamless work flow.

records by focusing on the client/patient record and patient vital signs. This can ultimately lead to adopting electronic records across all aspects of patient care,” Erickson explains.

Erickson says the switch from paper to electronic records often is accompanied by other changes in the hospital, including a change in PIMS. The size and scope of these broader changes can increase the learning curve but, no matter the size of the change, it’s important to have clear goals and a plan that engages the entire team.

Kevin Roughton, senior product manager at IDEXX, says the company has nearly two decades of experience helping practices adopt and fully use new software. IDEXX provides a range of resources—from free online continuing education accredited training courses to local user group meetings and onsite professional services—to help practices meet their goals.

“Based on our experience,” says Roughton, “practices that have a good change management plan can be effectively working in their EVMRs in less than a week. The success is improved significantly when all team members are aligned on the goal.”

Stephanie Heinz, sales account manager with eVetPractice, says there are EVMR systems that are based on computer servers and those based on the cloud, and “both are definitely superior to paper medical records.”

She suggests that practices considering making a switch from paper may want to jump directly to the cloud. “Now is the best time for practices to make the switch to cloud-based EVMRs to enjoy rapidly advancing technology and, more importantly, to have a voice in steering the direction the new and emerging software companies decide to head [in],” she explains.

Heinz notes that cloud-based systems, such as eVetPractice, offer software as a service. Instead of an initial outlay for equipment and software, the cost is spread over time as a monthly subscription.

However a practice switches from paper, Heinz explains, it likely will face sticking points. For example, it may have older staff members who are uncomfortable with computers or software. The practice’s entire staff will have to learn new processes. And an investment will be needed to modernize or even make the initial purchase of computers.

If your paper files are eliminated, what benefits might you find? Detjen notes that for some practices using a full room to store paper files, an additional exam room could be created out of that space. Other practices find they can see three or four extra patients a day because less time is

needed to pull paper files and write medical notes.

EVMRs also offer the benefits of making data for research and business statistics easily accessible, Detjen says. For example, a practice might want to search for the number of times a specific diagnosis was given, or if there have been other cases with symptoms similar to a case being diagnosed. Doing that with paper records would mean flipping through hundreds or thousands of case files.

Once you've implemented your paperless features, what will you do with your current paper records? Detjen says some practices start scanning everything on day one, but she thinks this is time-consuming

and causes mixed medical records between electronic and paper.

Instead, she says, "My recommendation is to scan as you go. For example, rather than scanning the entire collection of medical records starting in alphabetical order, only scan a patient's records when that patient comes in for a visit. Pull all records for patients scheduled to come in on one day and scan them the day before. This way your staff will know that the records for the patients they are seeing are electronic, and they won't need to hunt for paper files."

Anyone considering going paperless should visit or speak to a practice that has already done it. Using electronic medical records creates a definite competitive advantage for

a veterinary practice, Detjen says. It saves time, it's more efficient, it's easier to protect data from disasters, and it keeps complete records of patient histories in one spot.

"Veterinarians tell us that once they go paperless and implement EVMRs, they would never go back," says Detjen. "The speed and efficiency gains—and the ability to see a complete medical history on one screen—are worth it." ✖



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