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The best EHRs for small practices



Great product, lousy service. Any consumer can face that problem. You buy the best furnace on the market, for instance, but the local dealer installs it the wrong way.

Medical practices face this conundrum when they shop for an electronic health record. You must evaluate not only the quality of the program, but the quality of installation, training, and support.

Selecting an EHR solely on technical merits became immensely easier in July when a private, not-for-profit group called the Certification Commission for Healthcare Information Technology announced the first programs to receive its stamp of approval. The EHRs met more than 150 criteria set by CCHIT for functionality, security, and interoperability.

CCHIT certification, which we'll examine in-depth in a supplement to our Oct. 6 issue, is a critical tool for EHR buyers, but it doesn't speak to how fast a vendor will fix a bug in its program. Or if it has a reputation for fairness. Nor will it help you determine how responsive a vendor's help desk is if the system crashes—an important factor for a small group practice that doesn't have an in-house IT expert.

Fortunately, a number of companies do evaluate those service aspects of EHR vendors. We've included a top-10 list from two such companies. Each list focuses on EHRs for practices with up to five doctors, and most of the ranked programs have been certified by CCHIT. Read on to discover which ones are leading the pack.

KLAS asks, "Would you recommend to a friend?"

One cornucopia of comparative information on EHRs is KLAS Enterprises in Orem, UT. The company surveys physicians, practice administrators, and hospital officials on all manner of healthcare technology, be it practice management software, CT scanners, or consulting firms that help doctors select and implement an EHR. Exhaustive research reports cost doctors anywhere from \$300 to \$2,000 apiece, but they can look up KLAS ratings and other basic product information online (www.health.computing.com) for free if they complete an online survey on any software, device, or consultant they use. The results of these surveys, in turn, form the basis for future KLAS ratings.

The survey for healthcare software and medical

A comprehensive survey from two companies reveal the cream of the crop.

By Robert Lowes
SENIOR EDITOR

devices poses 40 questions—"indicators," in KLAS parlance. A quarter of them deal with the technology itself, but only in a general way. "Product works as promoted," reads one such indicator as summarized by KLAS. The other indicators look at service ("Quality of telephone/web support"), business expectations ("Helps your job performance"), and value ("Would you recommend to a

friend/peer?"). KLAS verifies each evaluation by interviewing the person who completed it.

In June, KLAS published survey results on 22 EHR vendors in the small-practice market—one to five doctors—drawn from 856 practice sites. Ten vendors qualified for the main ranking because KLAS received responses from at least 15 unique practice sites using a particular program. KLAS research manager and report author Brooke Spendlove says that's enough to establish a minimum confidence level in the results. The number of surveyed sites per vendor ranged from a low of 20 for e-MDs Chart to 66 for Misys EMR (the acronym for electronic medical records is used instead of EHR when it's part of the product's name).

Survey responses reveal vexing issues for EHR buyers

The KLAS survey on EHRs for small medical practices produced one clear frontrunner—eClinicalWorks, which scored 91.7 on a scale of 100. It led the scoring in each of the four survey categories. Coming in 10th place was Practice Partner Patient Records with a score of 76.3. Practice Partner posted the lowest score among all 10 vendors for service: 6.5 on a 9-point scale. Still, KLAS considers this service score slightly above average on its scale, and 84 percent of respondents said they would, nevertheless, recommend the product to a friend. But Practice Partner CEO and FP Andrew Ury isn't happy with the KLAS numbers, which he considers flawed.

"KLAS isn't a true random survey of our customers," he says. Other EHR vendors, he notes, coax satisfied customers to complete KLAS surveys to boost their score. "We traditionally don't do that." (For its part, KLAS states that while it asks vendors for a complete list of customers to survey, it tries to find unlisted customers if it suspects "cherry-picking.")

However, Ury acknowledges that about 20 months ago, his company (formerly known as Physician Micro Systems) struggled to provide good customer service

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during a growth spurt. “We’ve improved a lot,” he says. “We’ve cut our response time to requests for help by half. And we’ve reduced the time to resolve problems by 75 percent. Because they’re a lagging indicator, the KLAS scores don’t reflect our improvement.”

Ury notes that this year a jury of IT experts named his company’s product the best EHR for small practices, at an annual conference called TEPR—short for Towards the Electronic Patient Record. However, TEPR judges base the awards on information supplied by vendors, not by customers.

Drilling down to individual indicators in the KLAS survey highlights some vexing issues for doctors who want a paperless office. In the service category, the biggest gap between high and low vendor scores is for the indicator “Production errors addressed quickly.” Regardless of the vendor, software bugs are inevitable, says computer consultant Rosemarie Nelson in Syracuse, NY. A timely response, however, is not a given. Bugs that slow down daily operations need immediate attention, says Nelson, while less vexing ones usually can wait for a program update or a new release.

Perhaps not surprisingly, a related KLAS indicator—“Quality of releases and updates”—also yields a larger gap than most in vendor scores. “The issue is whether vendors test them enough for bugs,” says Brooke Spendlove at KLAS. “Sometimes a vendor’s new version of its software causes older features of the program to malfunction.”

Yet another indicator that separated vendors—and one that’s critical to most practices—is “Interfaces met deadlines,” with NextGen EMR posting the lowest at 5.9 out of 9 and Greenway Medical Prime*Suite* scoring the highest at 7.7. An interface is a software program that connects two others. Such bridging software is inescapable, says Nelson, since doctors want their EHRs to exchange data with practice management, pharmacy, and reference lab systems as well as download results from medical devices like ECG machines.

There are many reasons why a doctor may not receive promised interfaces on time: Maybe the vendor doesn’t employ enough smart programmers. Maybe its software technology is older than most, and therefore harder to meld with newer systems. Maybe a lab isn’t willing or able to connect to the EHR. Whatever the case, if you’re looking over prospective vendors you

need to make interfaces a prime buying point.

AC Group ratings shed more light on EHRs

Another oft-cited source of data on EHRs is the AC Group in

Montgomery, TX. Summaries of its research are available free at its website (www.acgroup.org). The firm charges doctors \$130 for its annual report on digital technology for medical offices.

The AC Group comes up with ratings by quizzing vendors with a 90-page questionnaire about what their products can and can’t do. “We go beyond CCHIT standards,” says CEO Mark Anderson. His company assigns each vendor a star rating from 1 to 5 to indicate how much confidence it has in the vendor’s responses.

In addition, the AC Group incorporates customer satisfaction data from KLAS, the American Academy of Family Physicians, and its own client base of physician practices and hospitals. Ratings also reflect the affordability of a given EHR and the financial viability of the vendor. “In other words, will this company be around in five years?” says Anderson.

The AC Group recently examined EHRs for practices with up to five doctors, and the results partly corroborate those of the KLAS survey. *eClinicalWorks*, for example, also topped the AC Group list. However, it shared first place with three others, including Practice

Power Points

- *eClinicalWorks* tops the list in two EHR ranking systems.
- KLAS ratings are free for survey participants.
- The AC Group’s ratings are partly based on a 90-page questionnaire.
- Grill prospective vendors about software interfaces.
- A vendor’s growth can strain its ability to provide customer service.

Partner, which placed 10th on the KLAS list. Analyzing EHRs, it turns out, is an inexact science.

eClinicalWorks is affordable and easy to use

Like Practice Partner, eClinicalWorks is also a TEPR topper, winning first place this year for EHRs in medium and large practices. However, 70 percent of its customers belong to groups with fewer than six doctors.

One reason why eClinicalWorks appeals to small practices is its low price. License fees for a combination EHR/practice management system—the overwhelm-

ing choice of customers—are \$10,000 up front for the first doctor and \$5,000 for each additional one, a steep price break not always found with other vendors. A two-doctor practice choosing a rival program might easily pay a total of \$30,000 or more, says Mark Anderson. Subsequent yearly maintenance and support for eClinicalWorks costs an additional 18 percent of license fees. For doctors who don't want to pay up front, there's a subscription plan of \$400 a month for the first doctor, with discounts that deepen for each additional colleague.

KLAS ranking of EHR programs for small medical practices¹

Vendor and product	Total score (out of 100)	Product/technology indicators (1 to 9)	Service indicators (1 to 9)	Success indicators² (1 to 9)	Business indicators³	Certified by CCHIT?
eClinicalWorks	91.7	8.0	7.9	8.2	98%	Yes
e-MDs Chart	88.5	7.6	7.7	7.9	95	Yes
Greenway Medical Prime <i>Suite</i>	85.6	7.6	7.6	7.6	89	No
GE Centricity	83.6	7.5	7.5	7.4	86	Yes
Misys EMR ⁴	83.3	7.4	7.4	7.3	87	Yes
MediNotes Charting Plus ⁵	82.2	7.3	7.2	7.4	85	No
Allscripts HealthMatics EHR ⁶	80.6	7.2	7.1	7.2	83	Yes
Emdeon Intergy EHR	78.2	7.1	6.9	7.0	80	Yes
NextGen EMR	77.4	7.0	6.9	6.7	80	Yes
Practice Partner Patient Records ⁷	76.3	6.9	6.5	6.7	81	Yes

¹Defined as practices with one to five doctors.

²Success indicators look at "factors that span the expectations before and after the sale."

³Business indicators are "measures of business value." Expressed as a percentage.

⁴Some vendors call their programs EMRs; others, EHRs.

⁵Since KLAS surveyed users, MediNotes has changed the name of its program from Charting Plus to MediNotes e (as in the lowercase letter "e").

⁶A4 Health Systems, the company that originally developed HealthMatics EHR, was acquired by Allscripts earlier this year.

⁷Practice Partner was formerly known as Physician Micro Systems.

Source: Table includes data from KLAS Enterprises and Certification Commission for Healthcare Information Technology (CCHIT)

But price alone doesn't explain the company's dominance in the small-practice market. An organization called the Massachusetts eHealth Collaborative recently offered about 450 doctors in 150 practices the chance to acquire a free EHR system from any one of seven vendors, with maintenance and support covered through June 2008. So up-front price wasn't a factor. Of the 150 practices, 136 went with eClinicalWorks (about half had received recommendations from an IPA and a physician-hospital organization).

Those folks apparently made a good call. Certified by CCHIT as having essential EHR capabilities such as maintaining a problem list and e-prescribing, eClinicalWorks offers cutting-edge technology such as an online personal health record that pulls in information from the EHR. But the technology isn't so sophisticated that it bewilders doctors, notes Anderson. In contrast, costlier EHRs may have more features needed by bigger practices, and they may be more customizable, but deploying them often requires the kind of dedicated IT staff that small groups lack.

As with other EHRs, glitches crop up in eClinical Works, too, but the company has a reputation for quickly correcting them. FP Michelle Rasmussen in Salem, OR, whose two-doctor practice purchased the program in late 2002, recalls how a software upgrade caused the system to file downloaded lab results in the wrong part of the patient record. In less than two days, eClinicalWorks dialed into their system and fixed the problem. "We're a small office, and they could blow us off, but they don't," says Rasmussen. "They're very receptive when we report a problem."

This level of service has put eClinicalWorks at the top of the charts, but can the company, which expects its revenue to jump 60 percent this year, keep it up? Brooke Spendlove at KLAS says other No. 1 EHR vendors have surrendered their titles when fast growth strained their ability to keep customers happy. That's all the more reason for doctors to monitor EHR ratings like those from KLAS and the AC Group. Nothing stays the same, especially in healthcare IT. ■

AC Group ranking of EHR programs for small medical practices¹

Vendor and product	Total score (out of 100)	Certified by CCHIT?
eClinicalWorks	94	Yes
Practice Partner Patient Records ²	94	Yes
ProPractica <i>StreamlineMD</i> Clinical ³	94	No
Medical Communication Systems mMD.net EHR ⁴	94	Yes
Bond Clinician	93	No
Allscripts HealthMatics EHR ⁵	92	Yes
Misys EMR	89	Yes
SynaMed	88	No
MedcomSoft Record	87	Yes
AcerMed EMR	87	No

¹Defined as practices with one to five doctors.

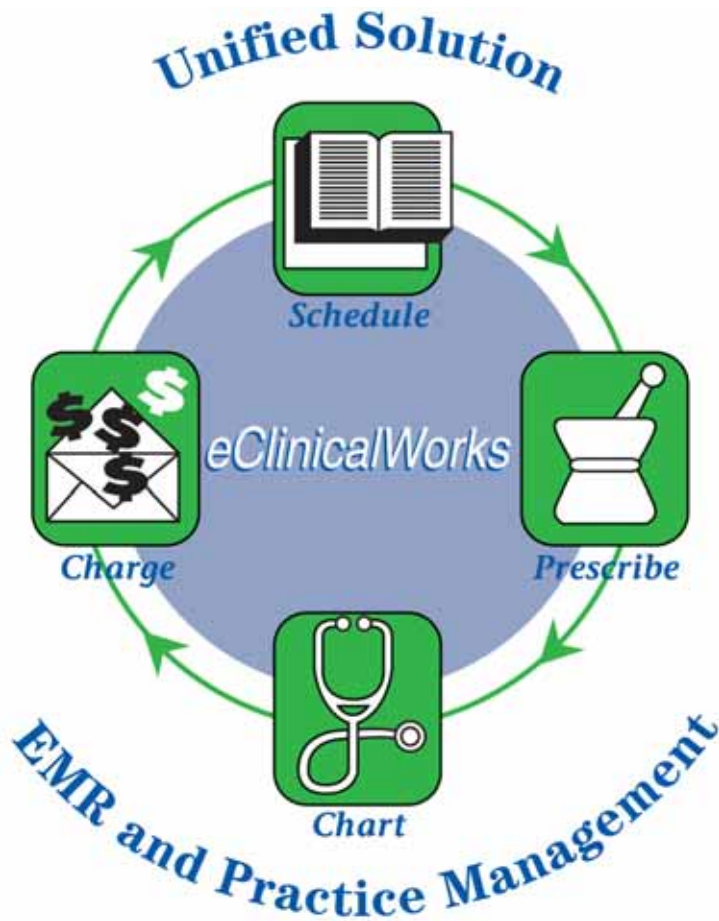
²Practice Partner was formerly known as Physician Micro Systems.

³ProPractica sells the CCHIT-certified Medical Communication Systems mMD.net EHR as a web-based program under this name.

⁴Some vendors call their programs EMRs; others, EHRs.

⁵A4 Health Systems, the company that originally developed HealthMatics EHR, was acquired by Allscripts earlier this year.

Source: AC Group, Certification Commission for Healthcare Information Technology (CCHIT)



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