



Going Digital with Ease at Athens Orthopedic Clinic

BY KAYO ELLIOTT

Providing orthopedic care to the community for almost 40 years, Athens Orthopedic Clinic, P.A. (AOC) is a thriving specialty practice of 20 providers, logging more than 40,000 patient visits per year and 15,000 therapy sessions, including orthopedic consulting for the Athletic Department of the University of Georgia.

Offering a full array of orthopedic services at its new clinic, therapy center, and MRI facilities, AOC made the move to chartless.

Facing Paper Challenges

AOC faced a problem not unlike many practices positioning for continued growth: selecting a paperless chart option that met the demand for modernizing the practice while minimizing the impact on physicians to re-learn workflow, lose productivity, or

change their documentation habits.

Paper chart management burdened the entire staff, encumbered overall operations, and affected AOC's bottom line. Because it was a software decision that touched every aspect of the practice, input from physicians, administration, staff and patients was essential. Chasing paper charts impacted not only AOC's professional, administrative, and finance office staff, but also AOC's interaction with referring physicians, pharmacies, and patients. When charts aren't where you want them, when you want them, it costs considerable time and money.

AOC needed a system that guaranteed immediate electronic access to complete patient information. Physicians were tired of waiting for paper charts; staff was tired of looking for charts. The entire "paper chase"

was wasting valuable staff time and resources. AOC needed a solution that would allow physicians to document patient visits, review existing patient data, insert reports, or cull the data for specific documentation. The new system had to eliminate the paper chase while at the same time give all appropriate staff electronic access to pertinent patient information.

The objective was clear: A cost-effective system that was easy for everyone to learn and simple to use. AOC accomplished all this and more.

Document Management Solution

Although there was consensus among physicians and staff that something had to be done, the solution was far from clear to many. As AOC's administrator, I led the practice's search for a cost-effective solution to end the paper chase and at the same time introduce other upgrades, including a new practice management system.

Input from professional and non-professional staff was encouraged, but we did not allow fear of change or preconceived notions about digital patient records to deter the process. While some practice physicians favored the move to a paperless office, there were others who were reticent to make an IT investment that might burden the practice financially for years. Other AOC doctors were adamant that they were not going to spend valuable billable hours training to be data-entry clerks. Still others balked because they might have to significantly change the way they documented patient visits.

When it became clear that the AOC physicians did not want to change their dictation patterns, a data-entry EHR package was ruled out. Working through an Atlanta consul-

tant, AOC was referred to SRS Software. After seeing the product demonstration, we were sold on the product and concept.

This document management system was the first we saw that would satisfy the group's needs and at the same time improve the workflow of the entire office. Our selection criteria included digitized charts, reasonable cost, minimal training and disruption to office operations, nominal impact on physicians, and low risk of failure.

A document management solution designed for health care is fundamentally different from traditional data-entry EHRs. Data-entry EHRs force physicians to enter exams into a structured database via a keyboard or mouse. A document management solution allows physicians to document visits in the manner to which they are accustomed because transcribed or handwritten exam notes, reports, and correspondence are scanned and stored in a secure central database and are accessible 24/7/365 from the office, hospital, or home.

AOC selected SRS' Freedom Chart Manager™ based upon its: document management format; ease of use; affordability; 20-minute training per user; limited downtime and productivity loss; and ROI.

Implementation

The document management implementation process was very easy—only about four months from contract to going live, a timeline that met the practice's parameters to move into its new location chartless. AOC, with the guidance of its IT consultant, outlined a plan to dramatically upgrade the technology offerings within the practice, including the new document management solution.

The IT network upgrade included a change from 15 workstations and a single server to more than 120 workstations and seven servers, as well as a digital dictation system, an e-mail server, and more. Firewalls created a

seamless network for all four practice locations and also allowed secure remote user access to the software and data through the Internet.

The document management solution designed for health care seamlessly integrated with AOC's existing programs and its new technology offerings including the new practice management system and the installation of digital X-rays. Ease-of-use, a critical component of any new implementation, was a key element in the final vendor selection. The system proved so easy to use that I trained the staff and doctors (about 60 people) myself. There was only a minor

ROI in Under One Year

- Saved 4,000 square feet of chart space in new facility = \$72,000/year in real estate savings
- Eliminated 2 full-time & 3 part-time medical records positions = \$81,000/year in salary & benefits
- Reduced paper, toner & chart expenses = \$10,000/year
- Eliminated at least 20 hours of overtime/week
- Grew the practice without additional employees or expenses
- Provided better patient care and faster responses
- Moved into new office chartless

learning curve and very little impact on productivity.

There was, of course, a detailed plan and work schedule to scan active charts into the system in preparation for going chartless. Although tedious, scanning active charts is simple and straightforward. Once completed, it allows physicians to access all charted documents in a user friendly format very similar to a physical paper chart.

Results

Shifting the practice to a chartless environment allowed AOC to design its new facility without a chart room—

a \$72,000 per year real estate savings on 4,000 square feet. There was an additional annual savings of \$10,000 per year for paper, toner, and chart supplies.

Chasing paper charts was a way of life in the old office. Although it's difficult to put a dollar figure on wasted time, there's no question that everyone on staff is more efficient now because of the new document management system. Before, nurses would call up to Medical Records for charts and wait hours for them to be located, pulled, and hand-delivered. Now, they complete their tasks with a few mouse clicks and move on to the next activity.

Directly after the document management system was implemented, our staff noticed a workflow change in insurance/billing, an area of daily office operation that was often fraught with delay—hours or days—because of limited access to information in paper patient charts and/or the actual time it would take to request and receive paper charts.

The availability of digital charts means that insurance/billing questions can be answered immediately. Staff can pull up any patient's records on the computer with a few key strokes, even if a clinical staff member is reviewing the same patient's chart for another purpose. This accessibility considerably reduced the need for repeat and/or return calls dealing with the same insurance/billing issue.

Our document management system was an easy, affordable solution that positioned AOC for continued growth. It enabled AOC to make the leap to digital records and meet its goals for streamlining workflow and eliminating paper charts while generating significant and measurable cost savings for the entire practice.

Within months, AOC was able to reduce the demands in its Medical Records Department by three part-time employees and move two others into growing areas of the practice.

This generated an annual savings of \$81,000 in salary and benefits. Workflow efficiencies also eliminated at least 20 hours of overtime each week.

These increased efficiencies enhance patient care and satisfaction levels, too. Now, we can get back to our patients or referring physicians with test results within minutes instead of hours or days. You just can't put a price on that.

This timeliness not only reduces patient anxiety and frustration, but also reassures our staff that all pertinent patient information will be on hand without delay. If a physician is speaking to the patient or his/her referring physician, the patient's entire medical file is immediately available, allowing the doctor to cull specific data at a moment's notice. Response time to patient and/or

pharmacist requests for medication refills is another example of increased operational efficiency that positively impacts patient care and satisfaction levels. With our document management solution, prescription requests are instantaneously entered into the appropriate digital charts and the doctors messaged. Actions to be taken are noted in the charts by the prescribing physicians. Instead of requiring 24 hours' notice for prescription renewals, most are accomplished in less than three hours' time. This electronic prescribing feature also minimizes the risk of medication errors caused by illegible handwriting, misidentification of drugs, or over- or under-dosing.

From the onset of this IT initiative, we had two demands: We needed to quickly automate our convoluted patient chart system and provide easy

access to that information electronically. Soon after the document management implementation, we realized additional benefits.

Athens Orthopedic Clinic learned that SRS' Freedom Chart Manager™ not only better manages patient information, but also impacts the workflow of the entire practice and generates considerable cost savings that are expected to reach \$800,000 over a five-year period.

This is an extraordinary outcome, especially in light of the EHR failure rate that other medical practices report. When our colleagues learn about our success, in terms of cost-saving as well as practice efficiencies, it is a real eye-opener, and we are more than pleased to share the good news.

Kayo Elliott is administrator at Athens Orthopedic Clinic, P.A. in Athens, Georgia.



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Clay Stobaugh
Vice President of Sales and Marketing
800.288.8369
cstobaugh@srssoft.com

SRS Software, Inc.
95 Chestnut Ridge Road
Montvale, NJ 07645
www.srssoft.com

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