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**Feature** Electronic Health Records

# Financial incentives are spurring growth of electronic health records

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**Julie A Jacob, freelance journalist**

[Author affiliations](#)

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[julieajacob215@gmail.com](mailto:julieajacob215@gmail.com)

Julie Jacob looks at the growth, usefulness, and challenges of electronic health records

It's a familiar sound to a patient waiting in an examining room to see a doctor: the patient hears the doctor just outside the exam room, flipping through pages of medical notes, and then the door opens and the doctor, holding a manila folder containing the patient's medical record, walks in. Now, however, a patient is more likely to hear the tapping sound of the physician typing notes into an electronic health record (EHR). The number of physicians and hospitals using EHRs has reached "the tipping point," according to a comment that Kathleen Sebelius, secretary of the US Department of Health and Human Services, made in a 22 May *USA Today* article.<sup>1</sup> Federal financial incentives for physicians and hospitals to adopt EHRs, along with a push from the government and insurers for more data about patient care and outcomes, are motivating physicians to make the transition.

Although physicians have been using computers for decades to schedule appointments and manage billing and

insurance claims, an EHR is different from practice management software, explained Steven J Stack, an emergency physician and chair of the American Medical Association's Health Information Technology Advisory Group. An EHR is "software to capture information about a patient. Some are fairly rudimentary, while others are very sophisticated," said Stack.

The federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) defines an EHR as "an electronic version of a patient's medical history that providers maintain over time." The EHR contains information on the patient's drugs, tests, laboratory results, immunizations, and procedures. An EHR can also include "evidence based decision support, quality management, and outcomes reporting," the CMS states on its website.

## Increasing usage

About 75% of physicians in the United States now use EHRs, also known as electronic ...

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