

Oncology EHR Vendor Pricing Comparison

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Purpose of this Document

This document is a white paper on pricing of various Oncology EHR vendors.

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By now, most community practice Oncologists should be convinced that they require a specialty-specific EHR for their practice. This is because oncology is amongst the most complex and data-intensive of medical specialties. It requires a full complement of features such as tumor staging, data-intensive workflows, chemotherapy dosing and administration, survivorship care; features that are not available in a generic system.

However, added functionality does not necessarily mean added complexity, something that most EHR vendors do not understand. One of the biggest complaints that Oncologists have against EHR vendors is their lack of focus on making the system easier to use. Moreover, most Oncology vendors are selling highly priced solutions that might meet the budgetary requirements of large cancer centers but not community practice Oncologists.

As an independent consultant, I was commissioned by a practice to evaluate Oncology EHR vendors, those with Medical Oncology as their primary focus. I was given the following criteria to shortlist and assess EHR companies:

- a. Integrated Solution (EHR with medical billing software)
- b. Budget range
- c. Easy to use but with maximum functionality
- d. Certified for Meaningful Use Stage 1 and Stage 2

The findings of this white paper are based on both primary and secondary research methods. This included face to face interaction and telephone interviews with existing clients, product demonstrations and online research.

Vendors Evaluated

- 1 Altos – OncoEMR
- 2 MedSym
- 3 CureMD
- 4 iKnowMed – McKesson
- 5 Varian Medical Systems – Aria

1. Altos OncoEMR

OncoEMR was one of the earliest Oncology systems to receive the coveted ONC certification. This is a relatively expensive product with their EHR and medical billing solution costing around \$ 1,400 per provider per month for the first year.

The system operates in the cloud which means that all the web hosting, IT-related issues and database management is handled by the vendor. This creates substantial cost and time savings on the practice's end; there is no need for hiring a dedicated IT manager to maintain the system or headache of manual upgrades to keep the system up to date.

However, in terms of usability many Onco customers found the system difficult to use complaining that they had witnessed an increase in their workload. There are too many clicks involved in getting the simplest of things accomplished. Moreover, the support is not very knowledgeable on the clinical side. This is a huge drawback as the support (in most cases) is unable to comprehend a client's complaint and resolve it in time.

Another negative of OncoEMR is that it doesn't allow interfaces with other practice management systems. In addition, it is a Modular solution, which means that you'll have to use a combination of this EHR and other software to demonstrate Meaningful Use. This has not stopped their clients from meeting their MU incentives though; OncoEMR has a relatively good record in helping their physicians meet their Meaningful Use requirements.

An important feature that Oncology practices especially require is the protection of their patient's privacy. This again is an area where OncoEMR needs improvement. While the system has automatic backup and the ability to restrict viewership rights to some medical records, it lacks an audit trail that tracks any updates made to a patient's record. It also does not assign a personal authentication or a unique user ID for logging into the system. This lack of identification can pose problems when trying to identify which user made any changes to your patient data.

In terms of training, OncoEMR offers on-site training to its practices which many clients prefer. However, they generally do not offer separate administrator, end user, group and individual trainings.

Verdict

OncoEMR offers all the necessary features that an oncologist requires. Their record in helping physicians meet their MU requirements has also been better than Epic and Varian. However, compared to some other vendors in terms of price, Onco is on the high end. It's also not one of the most user friendly solutions.

I would not recommend smaller/ mid-sized groups to purchase OncoEMR as there are better, more affordable systems out there with similar functionality.

2. MedSym

MedSym is a pretty straight forward solution offering most of the features that a medical Oncologist requires. Priced at just about \$600 per month, it is an attractive package for practices looking for a cheap solution.

However, if you are looking for improvements in delivery of care this system is a miss. Their support is outsourced offshore thus; you get to listen to a readymade script most times rather than a knowledgeable person who actually understands your problem and resolves it.

Similarly, though they offer enhanced functionality to their clients, there is a lot of developmental work still needed to make it helpful for the end user. For example, scheduling chain appointments or recurring appointments requires redundant work as there is no copy paste option. Also, while online messaging feature is a welcome addition, no record/ history is maintained for these conversations.

To wrap it all up, the solution is still unattested for Meaningful Use Stage 2 and does not have a patient portal. These should be important considerations for any practice as the company has been slow in meeting government certifications - leaving its providers to fend against penalties themselves. With such major shortcomings, this software could become a huge problem for your practice in the coming years.

Verdict

While they provide some useful value added services and the software costs lesser than other options in the market, the problems associated with functionality make the system extremely frustrating for physicians. Unless they work on reducing the steps involved in data entry, develop a competent support team and keep up to date with government certifications, this vendor is not the best investment.

3. CureMD

This is a relatively small Oncology Vendor in comparison to some others in this study. However, I have included them as they scored the highest in terms of usability in my research. What I liked about their system is that it packages all the required features in a clutter free interface. Moreover, their EHR is highly customizable to suit different practice workflows and sizes.

CureMD has also been proactive in developing features that most of their competitors lack. For example, unlike Altos OncoEMR, CureMD's application maintains a complete audit trail with up to date information on any changes being made to a patient's record. Their scheduler has the ability to automatically set up chain or recurring appointments. Similarly, unlike Medsym, CureMD's messaging system keeps a log of conversation histories that can be extracted.

In terms of certifications, they comply with all government standards in a timely fashion to help their clients meet regulatory requirements. They are certified for Meaningful Use Stages 1 & 2 and are also ready for the upcoming ICD-10 changes.

What makes it even better for community practice oncologists is their competitive price. CureMD offers its fully cloud based, EHR and Medical billing software for \$695 per provider. Added to that, the patient portal is free in this offering.

They also offer the flexibility of client hosted deployment for practices however, the pricing of that has not been disclosed on their website.

Another option for practices is to outsource their billing to CureMD. If you go for their billing service, they will offer you their EHR and PM for free.

While CureMD does not have as large a market share as some of the other vendors, client satisfaction is high, particularly for their target clientele – solo, small and medium scale practices. I have read positive reviews for their support services as well.

In the negatives, if you are looking to create a practice management interface with CureMD, they do not provide this service at the moment. You can either buy their standalone EHR or their integrated EHR with Practice Management software. Also, the system currently runs on Internet Explorer alone (any version) and does not have cross-browser compatibility. This can be a turn off for Apple users. However, to pacify Apple lovers, CureMD has developed a pretty comprehensive iPad EHR called Avalon.

Verdict

Though a small Oncology player at the moment, CureMD has a solid product for Medical Oncologists (for Radiation, CureMD Oncology is not the best fit at the moment). The system is relatively simple to use, has all the bells and whistles required for Oncology with a pretty decent pricing as well. Moreover, because this company wants to make a mark in Oncology Health IT, they are pretty receptive to clients' developmental needs and support issues. I would definitely recommend getting a demo of their product.

4. iKnowMed – McKesson

iKnowMed EHR by McKesson is a comprehensive web-based system with a complete suite of features for Medical Oncologists.

A value added feature that they have built into the system is a separate place and log for nursing documentation. This feature really helps keep track of what is being done by whom during a patient's visit. This is important as nurses and medical assistants often intervene in symptom management and patient follow up visits yet don't record these interventions as there is no real-time avenue for such documentation.

On the flipside, the cost for this Oncology EHR alone is \$660 per month. The system offers integration with Lynx Mobile inventory management to capture charges, My Care Plus patient portal for enhanced patient interaction, and can also interface with several Practice Management (PM) systems; they cost extra.

Charge capital and Practice Management help with billing and scheduling while the patient portal is a requisite for any practice looking to satisfy one of the Meaningful Use requirements. However, when you add all these costs to your cart, in addition to other smaller ones, the initial \$660 cost will easily exceed the \$1,000 mark.

Verdict

While the EHR does have several Oncology-specific features to improve an Oncologist's workflows, there are too many additional costs. At \$650, the cost of the EHR alone exceeds what many vendors would charge for an integrated PM and EHR solution. Moreover, adding the cost of the patient portal, integration with Lynx Mobile inventory management and a PM vendor would take the cost beyond what many small and medium sized practices could afford.

5. Varian Medical Systems – Aria

The first thing I noticed when analyzing Varian Medical System EHR was that it costs a lot more than its competitors. At \$1,350 per month, that too for just the EHR, the pricing of Aria is on the high end. This cost can be justified as Varian is the market leader in Oncology EHRs. Is Varian the best fit for Medical Oncologists? That too for small and mid-sized practices? I am not too convinced. Careful observation of Varian's market share indicates that they are leading in radiation Oncology. This is because Varian does have the most advanced radiation Oncology product; offering Radiation Therapy Devices and RT Planning Tools for this sub-specialty.

For Medical Oncologists, while the solution is feature rich it is not the most user-friendly of the lot. A big drawback is that Varian does not have its own practice management software. This is a huge setback for any practice as it will have to put up with two separate vendors and remain perpetually worried about what will happen to practice operations if the partners split.

Moreover, not having a Cloud-solution means that huge costs associated with on-site hardware and software will creep into your expense bill. You'll have to hire additional staff to maintain a dedicated server room while practices around the country are de-cluttering and securing their data online. The costs with on-site hosting get worse when the hardware starts getting old; you'll have to make costly upgrades and spend even more on maintenance as time progresses.

Another area they need to work on is their contract. With most EHR vendors, we see all the features highlighted and marked in the form of concise documents. However, Varian's contract resembles a maze with a thousand routes and you're bound on missing something. The solution has the necessary government certifications and the support is helpful.

They also offer a patient portal for their clients. While this is a positive development, the portal is not Varian's per say and is provided in partnership with Cogent Health Solutions.

Verdict

While the Oncology-specific provisions are good, the software is difficult to use and too expensive for my liking. Their Radiation-Oncology features have earned them a huge market share and they've done well there. However, they still need to work on their Medical Oncology product to enhance its usability.

Also, I feel that there are too many partners involved offering numerous services, thus, with Varian it often feels like a lot of individual pieces have been grouped together as opposed to a comprehensive unit.

Any one interested to learn more about any vendor, please feel free to drop an email to info@emr-specialist.com with your practice details.