

## **A Doctor and Her EHR: *An Interview with Dr. Karen Smith***

**By: Lauren Satterwhite**

A patient walked in to Dr. Karen Smith's solo family practice in the City of Raeford complaining of shortness of breath. Dr. Smith used her electronic health record (EHR) to access the cardiologist's reports and labs taken the week before and quickly recognized the deteriorating condition of her patient. Within minutes Dr. Smith was able to intervene and diagnosed the patient with congestive heart failure and transferred the patient to the cardio unit. No repeat tests and no hesitation needed.

Dr. Smith has had an EHR since starting her independent practice in 2003. The rapid transfer of data and availability of real-time information made available through her EHR helps Dr. Smith make, in some cases, lifesaving diagnoses.

In addition to helping with diagnoses, EHRs have taken patient trend reporting to a whole new level. Now, rather than relying on Excel spreadsheets to track a patient's progress over time, with the click of a button a doctor can show a patient their data in a digital live format.

Dr. Smith explains, "We can show a patient a graph of where they are today compared to where they were 10 years ago. Are they getting better or worse? The report is now well-integrated so you can get the information immediately."

Using EHRs to track patients, exchange health data and make clinical decisions not only assists Dr. Smith in providing excellent patient care, but she is also able to meet Meaningful Use (MU) Objectives as a sixth year participant in the NC Medicaid EHR Incentive Program.

While the \$63,750 incentive payment over six years does not reimburse her for her EHR, she has been able to use the incentive payments in her practice to help offset some of the costs of the EHR vendor upgrades. And meaningfully using her EHR has had major impacts on her practice. "For those providers who have attested to MU, they can track and follow their patients. In doing so, the cost of care for that population is lower," said Dr. Smith. Using an EHR to track patient trends and identifying the crux of a patient's issue enables providers to proactively resolve issues that may be resulting in an increase of treatment costs, like hospital readmission.

As she completes her final year of MU with the NC Medicaid EHR Incentive Program, her practice is "dancing with their EHR." Her practice is in tune with their EHR and understands what the system is capable of doing. She takes advantage of system upgrades to more quickly aggregate data and monitor health outcomes more effectively and efficiently.

Dr. Smith's advice for providers on effectively using an EHR is straightforward. She encourages those providers who do not have one to move forward with a fully integrated practice management and clinical management system in their practice. For those providers who have EHRs but still use paper for parts of their workflow, she suggests getting rid of the paper and

using the EHR to its full capability. For those providers who are using the EHR's digital capability and have it fully integrated into the practice but haven't changed practice workflow, she suggest adopting a new workflow and allow your support team to focus on their specialties. In addition to that advice, Dr. Smith also speaks highly of the NC AHEC, the technical assistance partner of the NC Medicaid EHR Incentive Program. The NC AHECs offer free assistance within the provider's practice and help them adopt, implement or upgrade (AIU) to EHRs, assist them in meeting MU, and help them attest. The NC AHEC not only helps providers with MU, but also offer training and educational opportunities for healthcare professionals.

It was the NC AHEC that encouraged Dr. Smith to practice in North Carolina, "I'm a baby born of the AHEC. The NC AHECs have supported me all of my 24 years (as a doctor). I did my residency with the AHEC and I've done trainings through them. Their support has been wonderful."

As the nationally named Family Physician of the Year for 2017, Dr. Smith is committed to providing quality care to her patient population and her progressive use of EHRs in her practice gives her an edge in accomplishing that goal.

Dr. Smith wrapped up our conversation by saying, "In the end we can all smile because it's been a great job done in seeing what the future holds. But we still have to stay a couple steps ahead of the curve."

Program Year 2016 is the last year to begin participating in the NC Medicaid EHR Incentive Program. Our attestation portal, NC-MIPS, is now accepting attestations for AIU and MU, so providers can attest today. For more information please visit [www2.ncdhhs.gov/dma/provider/ehr.htm](http://www2.ncdhhs.gov/dma/provider/ehr.htm) or send an email to our help desk at [NCMedicaid.HIT@dhhs.nc.gov](mailto:NCMedicaid.HIT@dhhs.nc.gov).