Unraveling the Healthcare Enterprise Content Management Acronym Mysteries

"What is the difference between EMR, EHR, PMS, and DMS and do they all have a place at the ECM table?" With the recent economic stimulus bill incorporating electronic health information technology as part of the plan, many healthcare professionals are being challenged to decide how to best answer that acronym laden question, especially those who are tasked with implementing electronic healthcare solutions. Even those of us who are part of the Enterprise Content Management (ECM) community have to admit that there is some confusion in trying to explain the various acronyms, their differences, and what should be the best combination of solutions that will lead healthcare organizations to a paperless environment.

Wikipedia states that an electronic medical record (EMR) is a medical record in digital format. It further states that EMR is considered to be one of several types of EHRs (Electronic Health Records) and categorizes Practice Management Software (PMS) as a category of software that deals with the day to day operations of a medical practice while defining a Document Management System (DMS) as a computer system used to track and store electronic documents and/or images of paper documents. Is it little wonder why those in the healthcare industry (as well as the rest of us) may be confused with Enterprise Content Management terminology for the healthcare industry?

But maybe it is not as difficult to explain as it first appears if we break it down into its logical parts. Let's start with ECM. ECM is the overarching term that Wikipedia describes as "the set of technologies used to capture, store, and deliver content and documents and content related to organizational processes." Between EMR, EHR, PM Software, and DM Software applications one discovers an array of ways to capture, store and deliver content and documents, all aimed at providing more efficiency within and between healthcare processes. In that context then, EMR, EHR, PMS, and DMS all reside under the overarching umbrella of the term ECM. And each can be broken down into their respective functional areas and practical significance to the healthcare industry.

EMR provides a way to maintain and manage a patient's medical record in a digital format. It provides patient demographics, medical images, medical history, test results, and billing records all within an electronic file framework so that physician efficiencies can be increased, patient care is standardized, and errors as well as costs can be effectively reduced.

EHR is often used interchangeably with EMR with virtually overlapping definitions in Wikipedia. The difference really appears to be in the context that the two terminologies are used. Sometimes EHR is used in a broader sense of defining electronic healthcare solutions and systems while EMR sometimes can be used when describing electronic healthcare systems more discretely. However, for the majority of those in the healthcare industry, EMR and EHR are used interchangeably.

Practice Management software is often linked to EMR/EHR systems and implementations as it provides further process efficiencies to be gained through functionality such as electronically scheduling appointments, maintaining a list of payers, streamlining billing and collection processes, and centralizing

record keeping. While there is some overlap between EMR and Practice Management software, such as with maintaining certain patient data, the bottom line is that PMS (as it is affectionately known in some healthcare offices) is intended to allow healthcare administrators and office staff to be more productive.

Document management software is the piece of the Healthcare ECM puzzle that is often overlooked and misunderstood. Document management software provides patient-centric functionality for other parts of the healthcare organization, such as HR, legal, accounting, and purchasing that many EMR and PMS software providers gloss over or ignore, as well as providing healthcare offices a way to archive all of their old paper based patient records that would not normally be converted into an EMR/EHR or a PMS system because they are not accessed very often. Additionally document management systems can often be implemented as a first step for healthcare organizations transitioning into EMR by providing a way for active records and charts to be digitized immediately even before the EMR implementation takes place.

So are the electronic healthcare acronyms that are circulating around the healthcare industry confusing. Yes. But can they be understood if broken down into their logical parts. Yes. And for the Healthcare Industry that means that EMR, EHR, PMS, and DMS all have a place at the ECM table in one form or another.