

The Alternative Line

by Joe Holzer for Publication in CNY-PCA Redline Report Copyright 2009 <http://www.holzerent.com>

Don't Worry (or maybe you should ;-) I am Still Alive

The following was a response on the Sourceforge.net Forums for OpenEMR where I volunteer. In retrospect, I made a mistake (ONE mistake?!) in hitching my career to production in the USA. We don't produce here, since we made celebrities of those who shipped our jobs to Asia, and then we began to worship celebrity, rather than people who actually did something useful. Anyway, for those who have read my birdcage liners, you know I tend to take a long view on things. While trying to reinvent myself, for both remuneration and for sanity, I have been working to make OpenEMR a much better medical practice management software than it was when I started about a year ago based on my wife's desires to use an EMR system. My response below was to a query about what happens ten years down the road to a practice which selects OpenEMR (and rhetorically, ANY EMR system), in light of the current uncertainties in healthcare and in operating systems like "cloud" computing, internet vs discrete OS, etc:

When Ferry Porsche built his first car, he made what he wanted, and hoped that others would want the same thing. There are plenty of parallels in software. At one time Beagle Bros was the best for the personal computer, the Apple II. But there are no guarantees. Seen any Beagle Bros software lately?

So, like the Porsche 356, which was by no means the most capable nor even advanced car made at the time, OpenEMR has a following which could be described as "disinterested", "interested", "committed", "enthusiast" and "fanatic". From my analogies, you could probably guess at my favorite automotive brand. But even they must adjust to the times, which is certainly different from anything Ferry envisioned.

OpenEMR is the only choice I found last year when looking for a system which was inexpensive, could be made to work in Windows, and could stand-alone because my wife does House Calls and connectivity is far from reliable. Those were MY needs I could support.

The prime advantage for me is its ability to be made to do things the way my wife wants to work, while having the vast majority of the technical functions completely invisible to her. I contrast that with ANY proprietary system, all of which must have been tailored to the needs of large institutions rather than a small medical practice for simple economics, and the "why" comes right clear. And since my wife is an NP, she insisted I replace any reference to "Doctor" or "Physician" with "Provider". Try doing that with a proprietary system.

I cannot be certain that the economics will support my being here in ten years, nor that OEMR.org can sustain that long. But Microsoft won't even support THEIR Windows 98. And YOU can't fix it.. At least YOU can support OpenEMR yourself, whether you move it to a web platform or run it in Windows, even if OEMR.org does pack it in.

Will it be possible to obsolete it when the internet operates on brainwaves? Probably. And one can never know what will happen with the hardware and its ability to deal with the mix. Think 5.25" floppy disks. And Fortran. But there are NO other choices which have foreseen the next big thing. And at least open source has a shot precisely because it is open - somebody will be motivated to make it adapt to that next thing.

I consider that a VERY good benefit/risk relationship. You should too. And it is currently the ONLY EMR system I am aware of which supports multiple user languages. I hope that helps.

And I am like you when it comes to disaster recovery and the ability to transcend technology. But those two issues are precisely the reason you should consider your risks as lower in every case for open source vs proprietary. If someone like IBM buys OEMR.org, you might not get the next version of OpenEMR free, but all the prior versions are, and you can find people who will support that. Proprietary locks you out. And I for one consider the still relatively few users of ANY EMR systems to still not have reached the 50% critical mass threshold. So OpenEMR could still become the dominant EMR system quite easily. It is certainly priced to do so.

I suspect that contributors like Tony, Brady & Rod Roark have different motivations from mine, but I AM certain we all intend that OpenEMR will be the better for our involvement. We hope you see OpenEMR evolve to be a world icon like Ferry Porsche made. But he never really set out to do so. He just wanted a car which satisfied HIM. And, like most good engineers, he never succeeded. Yet.

I suppose my awareness of the march of time, which seems to have done much of its marching on me, has led me to be retrospective. To ask what I would have done better, or at least differently, if I could have known then what I know now. But life is a cruel bitch that way; nobody gets that do-over or mulligan. They only get to imagine what might have been, and we all know that in those dreams we never factor the realities around us which could have made our “other” lives even worse. Many’s the time I have heard comments like “must have been real tough growing up a Kennedy”. Yeah? Look what it did for them.

I try to think how I would FIX those things I left unfinished. After all, it has always been the role of engineers to seek better ways of doing things. I am always well aware that it was engineers who built wonderful mechanisms like Porsches, suspension bridges, modern airliners, artificial hearts, joints and limbs. So I value Engineers. But I also know that it was engineers who designed the efficiency and efficacy of the systems at Auschwitz and Buchenwald, as well as the Saturn V which took Americans to the moon and back. And maybe they were the same engineers in both cases. I cannot imagine reconciling that, because engineers have often made things, like atomic bombs, because of the thrill of solving the technical problem, while never even considering the societal implications for their success. So I have no pearl of wisdom for you dear readers, except that every advance seems to have its own baggage which comes along for the ride. When the Spanish Inquisition finally ended with the Reformation and the Age of Enlightenment, let us not forget that it also put out of work, and therefore made destitute, the operators of the rack. You just never know.

Those who have followed my diatribes know my feelings about SUV’s. And my jokes about Joseph Lucas and his refrigerators being the reason the Brits drink warm beer. So you will certainly laugh to learn I just acquired a 1995 Range Rover. It drives in every way exactly as one would expect a high roll center truck with wormscrew steering. I bought it even before I sold my ’96 Grand Caravan, which was costing about \$5 per mile for upkeep – it was rusting away as it sat there, and I got fed up feeding it. But when I saw the RR and asked why it was being sold, I was told it “had a short somewhere under the dash”. The price was right, it had the hitch and gearing I wanted for moving my trailer, and its AC actually worked, so I knew it could at least be used as a backup car, which the Caravan could not. And as a ’95 it at least doesn’t have to pass that stupid NYS OBDII computer test, thank god. Time to find out what Jeremy Clarkson has been raving about on Top Gear all these years. So far he’s an idiot. But it is somehow charming as well.

As I had guessed, since I am pretty good at such things, there were some known and unknown issues. Suffice it to say that the seller knew very little about automotive electrics. The gas filler flap would not open despite her hearing the actuator. So she jammed a screw into the switch so she could pull the flap open, never thinking about the continuous draw that put on the battery. Small wonder it discharged every night. The seats didn’t move (electric), but it was because the switches sit where they collect any water which comes in the open sunroof, and the small ball bearings in the switches are made of carbon steel. Which rusts, they pit, and no longer roll. So the plastic levers break. I pulled them apart, cleaned them out with Naval Jelly, replaced the balls with SS ones, added Vaseline, et voila’. And I realized the gas flap was simply sticking at the hinge, and the spring was too weak to open it. Two screws removed the flap. The third was pulled from the switch. Next. Locks don’t turn because zinc diecast hates salt. Disassemble, clean & grease, and almost good as new. “Dealer Only” keys? Yeah, right. So the RR “land” on the key is .010 in wider than the blanks made for a Toyota. Put .005 in thick electrical tape on the clamp block and you wind up with perfect keys for \$3 instead of \$60 at the dealer.

And so on. The horn doesn’t work. Try allowing the plug to fit it by putting it back together correctly when you worked on the cruise control. You say it’s broke too? Ever replaced the cracked vacuum rubber lines? None of the lights on the right side work – hmmm, that smacks of a common fuse. Yep. The only “issue” I have yet to fix is the central locking, which is tied to the anti-theft alarm system. The Brits somehow cannot explain in English how the system is supposed to work so I can figure out what’s wrong. I will eventually, but for now I simply have to manually lock and unlock all, though I have verified all the actuators work fine individually.

Chuck & Joyce preserve by cleaning. Bill N preserves by never letting it get dirty in the first place. “Preserve” is probably not the right word in my case, even though it’s still largely the original parts ;-). So, no, I don’t think you have anything to worry about if you are talking concours, but “press on regardless” is my motto, and doing things like this is cathartic. Like I said, though, if I HAVE to fix things, I hate them. I fix things like that because I LIKE to, and on my time frame. Anybody have too much cash and needs a lot of stupid stuff like that fixed? Call me. Maybe I should make THAT my career ;-). I know somebody out there is still using Beagle Bros because their Apple II does all THEY need done.

