

Ethics of E-Health

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Abstract

Ethics in healthcare, is it a thing of the past? Ethics is an underlying priority to all involved in the implementation of electronic medical records. The term is not specifically noted in the research but this doesn't reflect the commitment of health professional to ensure privacy. Health professionals are in favor of electronic medical and strongly believe ethics is an integral part in healthcare and technology. Health organizations must remain committed to quality, privacy, and ethics. With continuous education of employees on these issues, ethics will remain a consistent principle in healthcare and technology.

The healthcare industry is on a mission to increase its technological framework. This mission correlates with recent natural disasters experienced in the US that have crippled certain aspects of the health industry. With the increased spending and efforts towards improving technology and its accessibility, will ethics be sacrificed for the cause?

Importance of e-Medical Records

Healthcare has benefited from information technology over the years. From patient scheduling to complex medical machinery, technology has revolutionized healthcare. Electronic Medical

Records is the buzz phrase in every IT department in healthcare organizations across America. Disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and Rita have amplified the interest in achieving this technological feat. Patient records were destroyed and any evacuees were clueless about the medications they were taking. This problem hindered practitioners from providing quality care. A majority of healthcare professionals believe electronic medical records would alleviate this problem in the future.

The 2005 Health Data Management CIO survey found that a whopping 74% of participating executives agreed with the statement, "Integrating my organization's hospital information system (financial/administrative) and its new clinical information systems will be top priority" (Anderson, 2005). Organizations are increasing budgets to accommodate the integration of information systems. According to the aforementioned survey, 71% of the respondents stated twenty percent of the organization's IT budget is dedicated to clinical information technology whereas the last year's results showed only 60% of the respondents indicated the same amount. Twenty-one percent (21%) stated IT budgets for the next fiscal year would increase by 5% - 10%.

The federal government is recommending healthcare providers increase the technological capacity of their organizations to include electronic medical records. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services will propose exceptions to sections of the Stark Act to assist with this change.

Under the exceptions, provider organizations would be allowed to furnish physicians with hardware, software and training services to adopt electronic prescribing or electronic medical records systems (Schuerenberg, 2005). The HHS Office of Inspector General is proposing exceptions to federal anti-kickback statutes as well. The lenient rules to facilitate this technological change may create ethical problems in the future. The ethical implications of bad decisions regarding these changes in rules could be detrimental to healthcare and patient trust in the health industry.

The implications

In reviewing the literature, ethics was not directly listed as priority in articles regarding electronic medical records but Financial Cost and Benefits were.

According to Health Data Management November 2005 issue, a web and telephone survey of more than 3,600 physician group practices found the average capital cost for implementing an electronic medical records system was \$33,000 per physician, with another \$1,500 per physician per month in maintenance fees. The upfront costs include purchase of the system, integration, upgrades, risk management, and user authorization. At Concord Hospital, Deane Morrison, CIO, gives a range of \$6.5 million to \$13 million for running the electronic medical records system (Briggs, 2005). The numbers will correlate with the size of the hospital and /or organization but if this is any indication of the monetary investment needed in this upgrade, IT budgets will sky rocket.

Wang, et al. (2003) in a study showed transcription costs would decrease by 28%, adverse drug events would be reduced by 34%, and laboratory charges could be lowered by 8.8% if electronic medical records were implemented in healthcare. With these costs savings, the system would pay for itself in 2 years and continue to save thereafter. Although savings will be actualized with electronic medical records, what type of privacy, compliance, and quality issues may arise out of the savings and new services offered to patients?

In this electronic and technological advanced society, privacy has become increasingly difficult to manage and protect. Patients expect health information to be private and only accessible to authorized personnel. Medical records contain personal information. This information should be protected due to its impact on employment opportunities, ability to obtain health insurance, and exploitation. There has even been discussion that medical history may affect credit ratings. As patrons learn this information, they are more reluctant to give information to healthcare providers.

There have been past violations of healthcare privacy e.g. St. Louis Post-Dispatch, July 3, 2001, p. A1 and Washington Post, September 27, 1998, p. A1

HIPAA has security provisions in place to maintain a secure exchange of protected health information. The ethical problems are in the amount and quality of the technological purchase by an organization. Purchasing the least expensive software to save money may compromise the security of protected health information. Training and user authorization are other issues to consider. Adequate staff training is vital to the success of this process. Human resources have a role in maintaining privacy. Hiring the right people for the position adds another layer of protection to the information. Other methods of protecting privacy are encryption, access control, authentication, and administrative controls.

Electronic medical records will increase the quality of care and patient satisfaction until privacy is violated due to an unethical act. Paper medical records must be transported with a patient throughout their stay at a hospital, increasing the chances of misplacement, therefore leading to compromised information. Electronic medical records will reduce chances of duplicate procedures due to lost information as well as patient wait time, thus improving quality and patient satisfaction. In the event of an emergency, as in Hurricane Katrina, electronic medical records would increase the quality of care provided. Treatment would not be delayed and the possibility of prescribing medications that may cause an adverse reaction is minimized.

Practicing Ethics and Delivering Healthcare

The potential for invasion on any electronic front is on the rise and with information that could potentially harm a person, ethical practices should be the main concern. Many articles focused on financial costs rather than ethics. In any business venture financial cost should be evaluated but how valuable is ethics? Healthcare organizations should maintain the same ethical practices currently used with paper medical records. IT professionals have a huge responsibility as

protectors of patient information. Although privacy laws are far behind the advancement of technology, the government is making every effort to ensure patients' privacy is protected. Health professionals have the same attitude. According to Dr. Ronald Washington, an internist, "Ethics is a big deal in our profession. We practice by ethics. I don't see why e-healthcare would be any different.....Electronic medical records would benefit everyone but we can't allow invasion of a person's privacy to be the sacrifice....Hurricane Katrina was a disaster and treatment of the evacuees was difficult. The silver lining in that disaster is we learned something. You always have to learn something or the experience is worthless. The integration of healthcare and technology is inevitable. The balance is now getting the IT professionals and healthcare professionals to work together to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of patients. We will all be a patient at some point so we must work at maintaining privacy as though it were our records at stake. I know you always have to worry about those radical people that want to invade your privacy but we have to work at ensuring our patients they are protected. If patients lose faith in us and our commitment to them, we lose everything." Dr. Washington makes a great point, ethics in the health profession directly relates to the patients. The commitment to quality and privacy will have an effect on the successfulness of any new project in healthcare.

Conclusion

Ethics will not be sacrificed for technology. Even though there aren't many journal articles regarding e-healthcare ethics, the commitment to maintaining patients' privacy has **always** been a priority. Professionals in the healthcare field take ethics very seriously. They understand the impact of ethics on their daily life, as well as on their professional success. The implementation of electronic medical records would only solidify the resolve to maintaining high ethical standards.

Healthcare organizations should adopt stronger policies and procedures on ethical practices and the protection of electronic (and other) patient information. They should also provide the necessary training and orientation on ethical principles and practices. Codes of ethics should be more visible and should become the pivotal axis of every professional's practice and behavior.

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