

Nationalized Electronic Health Records

You may never need to fill out a form when you visit a doctor's office. Instead of having a different medical record number at each hospital or doctor's office, patients can have their entire medical history accessible online in one place. This will fundamentally change medical malpractice as we've come to know it, liability insurance, and the way many of us look at healthcare related negligence claims.

Pros

The argument for a nationalized electronic health records system is strong. Patients are often unsure of their own medical history and easily forget when they received what treatment. When patients move or switch providers, they often fail to ensure a thorough transfer of records to their new physician. Digital health records maintained by the federal government will not need to be physically transferred, making it possible for any practitioner to view a patient's entire medical history. Increased accessibility of health records reduces healthcare costs by eliminating redundant procedures and by giving physicians access to baseline studies, further improving the quality of patient care. Digital health records also reduce medical errors by taking handwriting out of the equation.

Cons

Patient privacy is the largest concern among policy makers considering nationalizing health records. Right now, patient information is treated as private property by hospitals and providers who are obligated to maintain patient confidentiality. An individual can neglect to tell her dermatologist that she had a history of depression if she doesn't feel the need to disclose that information. At times, such discretion is simply a patient using her rights, but in other cases, patients may leave out crucial information that could impact a physician's decision making. When all that information becomes government property, what role will the individual play in choice of disclosure?

Additionally, a security breach or abuse of a national health information system has the potential to be much more catastrophic than a slipup by a single hospital. In fact, the Nazis used their national health database to filter the German population for the diseased and the genetically undesirables. While the United States has extensive safety measures in place to protect an individual's privacy, the fragmented systems of medical recordkeeping currently in use naturally limits the potential for widespread distribution of sensitive health information, which can be a boon and a bane.

The Expert Review

With uncontrollable healthcare costs on everyone's minds, the benefits of consolidating people's health information into one streamlined system may be hard to ignore for much longer. If the government keeps your criminal record and driving history on file, why not your medical records too? Should we implement a universal medical information system, doctors will be expected to utilize all the information available to them, and they will no longer be able to deny responsibility for not being given information. The majority of doctors do not advocate nationalization of health records possibly because they enjoy the ease of jotting notes down on charts, or because they realize the implications of increased liability. The medical community will have to develop new protocols to deal with the

additional opportunities for negligence, but we should not be afraid of change for the sake of improving healthcare.