Review article

Restoring confidence in the Nigerian healthcare delivery system: essentials of effective health records services

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ABSTRACT

Background/Objectives*:* Nigerian healthcare delivery system has faced a lot of challenges ranging from under-funding, inadequate health workforce, poor service delivery, ineffective health information system, poor access to essential medicines to poor leadership and management. The ineffective health information system in Nigeria might not be unconnected with the disjointed health records management systems in our health facilities. This factors no doubt, are responsible for inaccessibility of patients health records on point-of-care leading to longer patient waiting time and sometimes cause preventable deaths. Loss of patients'/public's confidence in the Nigerian healthcare delivery system can better be imagined among other clinical challenges in the systems. Restoring patients' confidence through the instrumentality of effective health records service may be the stepping stone and the right step in the right direction. This paper examined restoring confidence in the Nigerian healthcare delivery system and the essentials of effective health records services. ***Methods/Design:*** This paper reviewed various opinions of the scholars as it affect the Nigerian healthcare delivery system, essentials of effective health records services and how to restore the confidence in the system. ***Results:*** It was discovered that Nigerian healthcare delivery system is not properly organized and coordinated; it lacks efficiency and effective services thereby causing loss of confidence. Restoring the confidence in the sector is the responsibility of everybody and effective health records service can be accomplished when various healthcare providers who are the contributors to health records accord it with the required high priority and place it in the rightful position of importance it really occupied in the sector. ***Conclusion:*** The paper concluded that everything being equal, it is essential to have an effective health records services institutionalized in our healthcare facilities as one of the key drivers of quality healthcare services to restore the confidence in Nigerian healthcare delivery system. The paper however recommended among other things, that health records department should be well structured and staffed in order to provide effective health records services and that deployment of Electronic Medical Records (EMR) should be considered to solve the problems of storage space, misfiling, mislaying and missing case notes so as to restore the confidence of the patients in the system.

Keywords:, Public confidence, Healthcare delivery system, Health records services; Good health records management practice; Teamwork

INTRODUCTION

Healthcare systems in Nigeria like other African nations, suffer from neglect and under-funding, leading to severe challenges. The three major challenges identified were inadequate human resources, inadequate budgetary allocation to health and poor leadership and management[1]. Nigerian healthcare delivery system over the years has been bedeviled with maladministration and dwindling budgetary provisions and this accounted

for weak healthcare system and responsible for poor healthcare indices being ascribed to the country. Loss of patients' confidence in Nigerian healthcare delivery system can better be imagined among other clinical challenges in the hospitals. Restoring patients' confidence through the instrumentality of effective health records service may be the stepping stone and the right step in the right direction.

Overview of Nigerian healthcare delivery system

Asakitikpi averred that healthcare delivery in Nigeria has faced major challenges towards achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and this is as a result of economic downturn resulting from plummeting of oil price of which Nigeria depend[2]. Welcome opined that despite Nigerian's strategic position in Africa, the country is greatly underserved in the health care sphere and that various reforms put in place to address the problem are not implemented[3]. He further averred that health care system remains weak as evidenced by lack of coordination, fragmentation of services, dearth of resources, including drug and supplies, inadequate and decaying infrastructure, inequity in resource distribution, and access to care and very deplorable quality of care. Nigeria's health care delivery system consists of a network of primary, secondary and tertiary facilities which were poorly developed and had suffered several backdrops with no adequate and functional surveillance and tracking system to monitor the outbreak of communicable diseases. Health indicators in Nigeria are some of the worst in Africa and the country has one of the fastest growing population globally with 5.5 live birth per woman and a population growth rate of 3.2% per annual[4]. Hospitals in Nigeria especially at the secondary and primary levels have been reduced to mere consulting clinics, a situation where patients after consultations are asked to go out and buy drugs,

do investigations and in worse scenario buy exercise books as patient folders before they can even be attended to. It is impossible to compare the fund being expended on healthcare to the facilities on ground as there is clear gap. Substandard care wastes significant resources and harms the health of populations, destroying human capital and reducing productivity.

Essential of effective health records services

All services in the hospital are classified as essential services. Health records service is one of the services being rendered in the hospital, therefore, health records service cannot be in isolation[5]. Bali *et al* stated that health records are the document that explains all detail about the patient's history, clinical findings, diagnostic test results, pre and postoperative care, patient's progress and medication. This means if written correctly, it will support the doctor about the correctness of treatment. Suffice to say that a good health record serves the interest of the management, the medical practitioner as well as his patients. It is very important for the treating physician to properly document the management of the patient under his care. The Medical Protection Society Limited (TMPSL) averred that good quality medical records are essential component of safe and effective healthcare[6]. Good health records are essential for the continuity of care of patients; they are vital for defending a complaint or clinical negligence claim and provide a window on the clinical judgment being exercised at the time[6]. TMPSL further stressed that the presence of a complete, up-to-date and accurate medical record can make all the difference to the outcome of care and that record maintenance is the only source of the truth, far more reliable than memory and the only way for the doctor to prove that the treatment was carried out properly[6]. Pirkle *et al* asserted that health records keeping is essential to evaluating, ensuring and improving the

quality of health care and that adequately kept health record improves the coordination and continuity of care, reinforces decision-making capacities, augments staff accountability and achieves more accurate vital statistics[7].

Health records provide documentary evidence of a patient's healthcare information, it contains valuable patient information which makes health professionals have obligations to keep these records confidential as well as ensuring that they are legible, accurate and that the documentation is presented in an orderly fashion[8,9]. Researchers stated that health records are a fundamental part of a doctor's duties in providing patient care and it forms a permanent account of a patient's illness. Despite the importance of health records, it was only given low priority and no standard model by healthcare professionals and this is responsible for illegible entries, offensive comments, and missing information, and there is often inconsistency between entries by doctors, nurses, and midwives[9]. According to Marinic, health records are the most important database of health treatment of the patient, which serves as proof of proper monitoring, planning and treatment of the patient[9]. The records of the health status of individuals affect the good name and dignity of the individual and, indirectly, the dignity and reputation of their descendants and close relatives[10]. Hence the need for using effective health records service to restore the confidence. From legal point of view, Marinic further even if everything was done correctly at the time of an incident, if it has not been documented, it has not been done and this makes even the best of doctors difficult to defend[10]. Syberscribe alluded to the fact that running a medical practice and seeing patients on a regular basis, requires keeping accurate medical records to ensure quality patient care, meet legal and ethical obligations[11].

Effective Health Records Services
Effective health records service is the provision of expected or intended health records service that will influence better outcome of care. Ensuring effective health records service in healthcare delivery system is therefore, the responsibilities of every healthcare professionals contributing to the patients' records. Effective health records service is therefore, records of good qualities, goodness of which start from records creation. If a health record losses its unique identity at the point of creation, full of incomplete information, such records cannot deliver effective health records service.

Qualities of effective health records service

Pirkle *et al* identified the following as qualities of a good and effective health records[7]:

1. Unique identity
2. Completeness, consistence and comprehensive
3. Chronologically arranged (contents)
4. Easily available and accessible on demand
5. Originality of contents
6. Sufficient information to justify the means
7. Continuum (continuity) and enjoin life span

Guides to good documentation
Similarly, Marinic (2015) and Syberscribe (2019) listed essential things writers of patients' records should do to ensure effective health records service[10,11]:
1. Write entries clearly, objectively and legibly to avoid unnecessary defence;
2. Capture the details of the patient, date and time, include other relevant and up-to-date patient information;
3. Avoid abbreviations to convey uniform meaning and acceptance of other opinions;

4. Do not alter an entry or disguise an addition to avoid being charge for forgery or suppression of records;
5. Avoid unnecessary comments to prevent litigation;
6. Check dictated letters and notes to confirm your opinion on the affected case;
7. Check reports to be sure of the case you are reporting;
8. Be familiar with existing data protection laws to know how much information to be documented;
9. Keep medical records secure to avoid bridge of confidentiality, ensure availability and retrieval;
10. Train staff and review the recordkeeping system to ensure availability and accessibility;
11. Use a medical transcription service during ward round to ensure availability

Restoring confidence in healthcare delivery System through quality health care information

Building quality health services requires a culture of transparency, engagement, and openness about results[12]. Culture of transparency can be achieved through adequate information process and records keeping. World Health Organization (WHO) states that the proper collection, management and use of information within healthcare systems will determine the system's effectiveness in detecting health problems, defining priority, identifying innovative solutions and allocating resources to improve health outcome[13]. Quality of care according to WHO is the extent to which health care services provided to individuals and patient populations improve desired outcomes and that in order to achieve this, health care must be safe, effective, timely, efficient, equitable and people-centred[11]. Quality healthcare is more than just given care; it involves

value for money and satisfactory service. Quality healthcare is doing the right thing for the right patient, at the right time, in the right way to achieve the best possible results. Measurement of quality of healthcare service using all the enumerated metrics is only possible if and when there is provision and maintenance of effective health records service in healthcare facilities. As we have seen, the situation of the healthcare delivery system in Nigeria is worrisome such that majority of people do not have confidence in the system and have lost trust in the service. Consequently, the rich people travel out for medical tourism while the poor patronize the traditional healers. The loss of confidence in Nigerian healthcare delivery system might not be unconnected with inaccessibility of care, lack of proper records keeping, absence of continuity of care and longer patients' waiting time among others.

To improve quality of healthcare and restore the patient confidence, WHO identifies seven categories of interventions, some of which are drivers of essentials of effective health records[12]:

1. Changing clinical practice at the front-line;
2. Setting standards;
3. Engaging and empowering patients, families and communities;
4. Information and education for healthcare workers, managers and policy makers;
5. Use of continuous quality improvement program and methods;
6. Establishing performance based incentives (financial and non-financial);
7. Legislation and regulation.
8.

Importance of effective health records services

There can never be effective health records services without effective and functional health

records department to coordinate all these activities. Health Records Department is the department responsible for creation and management of patients' health records. The department's prime objective is the provision of patient health records in a timely manner to different hospital units in order to assist physicians, other healthcare professionals and other hospital staff in the provision of quality care to patients. The department is not only the first port and last port of call but, it is equally an image builder of the hospital. Its services cut across all specialties and this explains why the department is a pivot over which other departments revolve in any hospital.

According to Ajami *et al*, the Medical Records Department (MRD) has become an essential department in every hospital, which provides multiple services not only to the patients but also to running a hospital efficiently and plays a key role in health promotion and patient care quality[14]. With this therefore, restoring confidence of patients in the healthcare delivery in Nigeria should start from provision of effective health records services. Bridge Clinic (2018) posited that comprehensive and accurate medical records empower healthcare professionals to treat patients to the best of their ability[15]. Every single available detail is important because all accumulated information can contribute to diagnosis and treatment. To diagnose and treat patient effectively, care providers need adequate clinical information, rapidly changing medical-evidence based (investigations results) and provider's orders guiding the process of patient care, which constitute the contents of health records. The gains of having effective health records service especially, electronic medical records (EMR) in place were underscored by the Bridge Clinic and are enumerated below[15]:

1. Safety of patients can be increased;
2. Processes can be sped up;
3. Claims processing and reimbursement can be improved;
4. Effectiveness of therapies and treatments can be monitored and tracked;
5. With a growing amount of information, outcome predictions can be made;
6. From a legal point of few, liability is reduced as a result of increased oversight;
7. With IT, loss of information, errors and omissions can be significantly reduced;
8. Accurate documentation of initial assessments and progress improves quality assurance;

Methodical records of symptoms, diagnoses and treatments will greatly benefit the next healthcare professional involved and more importantly benefit the patient.

CONCLUSION

Nigerian Healthcare delivery system is not properly organized and coordinated; it lacks efficiency and effective services thereby, causing loss of confidence. To restore confidence in the sector is the responsibility of everybody and this depends on a number of factors earlier enumerated. Effective health records service is one of such major factors and the first step to take in restoring the lost confidence. Effective health records service can be accomplished when various healthcare providers, who are the contributors to health records, accord it the required priority and place it in the rightful position of importance it really occupied in the sector. Then, all the shortcomings of health records keeping can be largely resolved by deployment of electronic medical records. This is especially in the area of storage capacity, accuracy, reliability and promptness of service, which will subsequently restore the confidence in Nigerian healthcare

delivery system. It can therefore be concluded that all things being equal, it is essential to have effective health records services institutionalized in our healthcare facilities as one of the key drivers of quality healthcare services in order to restore the confidence in Nigerian healthcare delivery system.

Recommendations:

To ensure effective health records service that will restore confidence in Nigerian healthcare delivery system, the following are recommended:

1. Health records department should be well structured and staffed in order to provide effective health records services;
2. Deployment of Electronic Medical Records (EMR) should be considered to solve the problems of storage, misfiling, mislaying and missing case notes;
3. Training and retraining of healthcare providers especially, HIM professionals, physicians and nurses on the need to accord high priority to proper documentation of patient health records;

4. Establishment of effective tracing and tracking system to be able to give account of all paper-based health records on transit;
5. Provision of adequate security to ensure safety and enhance confidentiality of patient health records;
6. Formulation and enforcement of policies and procedures on records/information release and retention;
7. Considering information contained in health records as one of resources required to produce healthcare services.

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Authors Contribution:

ARA conceived of the study, initiated its design, participated in data analysis and coordination and drafted the final manuscript. ATT, AIT, OLM, ASO participated in data analysis and coordination and reviewed the final manuscript.