



Perspectives

Clinical governance and the imperatives of effective healthcare data management in Nigeria: consolidating human resource for health records

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ABSTRACT

Background/Objective: Clinical governance, which largely requires quality healthcare data, is a system through which healthcare organizations are accountable for continually improving the quality of their services and safeguarding high standards of care by creating an environment in which excellence in clinical care will flourish. This study reviewed the relationship between clinical governance and Health IT in the Nigerian context. **Methods/Design:** An insight into clinical governance, Health IT and the roles of Health Information Management (HIM) professionals in Nigeria. **Result:** Clinical governance cannot be achieved without an effective health records system. The Nigerian healthcare system, which is characterized by paper-based records, is however still in the infancy stage of migration to electronic format. Effective clinical governance in Nigeria may therefore not be realized soon. **Conclusion:** It is noteworthy to say that clinical governance and quality healthcare data are dependent on each other for effectiveness. As such, the quality of healthcare data must be reassured. Government at all levels of healthcare and all health stakeholders in Nigeria therefore need to invest more in HIM professionals for an improved public health.

Keywords: Clinical governance; Health information technology; Information governance; Patients health records; Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

Clinical Governance (CG) is an approach that provides a framework for assessing and improving clinical quality and better health outcome through a single coherent program¹. It is a relatively new and increasingly accepted approach to the improvement of quality and safety in healthcare services². The term was first introduced in the 1990s in the United Kingdom². It has become popular as a response to a series of concerns about the quality and safety of healthcare in the United Kingdom, Canada and other places³⁻⁵. Clinical governance is a system through which healthcare organisations are accountable for

continually improving the quality of their services and safeguarding high standards of care by creating an environment in which excellence in clinical care will flourish². Its framework is a set of initiatives designed to enhance care, and the promotion of a productive culture and climate within which care can thrive⁶. Proponents of CG collectively claim that it provides a framework and support for quality improvement activities, drawing parallels with the concept of corporate governance by emphasizing the accountability aspects of the clinical governance agenda^{2,7,8}.

Clinical governance is categorised into two distinct elements: The mechanistic element of ensuring systems are in place and the more philosophical element of producing an environment in which clinical quality can thrive⁹. Its components include Evidence Based Medicine (EBM), accountability, clinical audit, risk management, performance evaluation, patient involvement and so on¹. The World Health Organization recommends its member states to implement CG¹⁰. Principles of CG include medical error reduction, patient safety, patient and community involvement, teaching and leading, use of information, clinical effectiveness, clinical audit and human resource management^{11,12}. Clinical governance considers both responsibilities to maintain the current level of care and the improvement of the quality of the future care simultaneously¹³. Indeed, it provides a unique and comprehensive strategy of continuous quality improvement as a systematic model¹³. It is a key drive towards quality improvement in healthcare and enhancement of the corporate responsibility for the quality of care^{2,14}.

Clinical Governance provides a framework for bringing together all local activities for improving and assessing clinical quality into a single coherent program, which encourages everyone in the organization to be a part of and work to improve quality and safety of patient care¹⁵⁻¹⁷. Healthcare quality that is pursued by CG consists of several measurable dimensions such as safety, accessibility, acceptability, appropriateness, provider competence, efficiency, effectiveness and outcomes^{18,19}. Measuring all these components requires data and the hospital is well known as a data-driven environment with patients' health records and hospital-held health information as the source.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Clinical governance and the patients' health records

Clinical Governance plays a central role in determining a rational improvement of appropriateness levels and it recommends the standardized and repeatable tools to monitor healthcare quality improvement¹. Improving healthcare efficiency requires quality healthcare data and information. Healthcare organizations are typically data-driven as data are generated in every aspect of care processes⁶. To improve the quality of care and to stay well informed on developments in specialist areas, healthcare providers need access to quality health information²⁰. Healthcare data and clinical governance may be referred to as two inseparably linked entities. Clinical governance on one hand has been said to have played some roles in effective data management. Healthcare data on the other hand, play critical roles in ensuring successful clinical governance programs. In Australian for instance, Pearce *et al.* reported that computerized medical records (CMR) works well, and it is being used to facilitate clinical governance activities²¹. Another study reveals that clinical governance though not with significant impact, has improved nursing documentation²².

Patient access to their health records has become the norm in some communities especially in developed nations²¹. This increased openness may help ensure good governance²¹. Engaging patients in the management of their care records is a way to improve its quality. In spite of patients' confidence about the security of their health records as maintained in the hospital, they would frown at any use of such records in research without their consent²³. A Nigerian study reported that patients would always want to be contacted each time their health record is to be used in

research²³. While patients in Nigeria are becoming interested in their health records, the country's healthcare system has not developed to such an extent of granting patients access to their records. While practices and localities are widely engaged in clinical governance processes, little attention is given to data quality²¹. Nigerian studies have corroborated inappropriateness such as improperly kept clinical registers, gross underutilization of discharge summary forms and suboptimal clinical documentation²⁴⁻²⁶.

Quality clinical documentation for enhanced clinical governance

Computerized health records systems can support clinical governance activities; however, unless the standardization and data quality issues are addressed, it will not be possible for the systems to work at higher levels²¹. With the preponderance of paper-based and disjointed healthcare data in Nigeria, benchmarking standards will be challenging²⁷. If poor data quality and the disparate nature of record systems and system architecture remain unaddressed, clinical governance may be a mirage in Nigeria²⁷. Implementation of a statutory clinical documentation improvement program will be necessary in order to improve data quality in the healthcare systems²⁵. An internal departmental routine chart review at health records needs to be strengthened²⁵.

Locally relevant clinical indicators and the use of electronic health records (EHRs) could support clinical governance²⁸. Studies have recommended governance for the management of patients' health records itself. For instance, Reti *et al.* opined that the policy process for personal health records can be improved by having a minimum personal health records (PHR) governance structure²⁹. This technology (PHR) is a modern health technology with the ability to

engage patients more fully in their healthcare²⁹. Its (PHR) governance structures affect policy processes and eventual policy outcomes. This could include qualitative assessment of patient governance representation as it relates to organizing meetings, participation in discussions, public dissemination of information and patient contribution to final policy decisions²⁹.

Healthcare experts, policy makers, payers and consumers consider Health IT such as electronic health records and computerized physicians order entry to be critical to transforming the healthcare industry³⁰. To evolve a culture of clinical governance, hospitals and healthcare organizations must develop excellence in the deployment and effective use of information and data to support policy decisions and processes³⁰. Such data and information must be valid, up-to-date, and presented in a way that provides insight such that will help staff to self-evaluate their services³¹.

Investing in HIM professionals for good health records practice, enhanced clinical governance and improved public health

Most healthcare professionals believe that Health IT has a little role to play in clinical governance³². It is important to reiterate that Health IT is in general increasingly viewed as the most promising tool for improving the overall quality, safety and efficiency of the healthcare delivery system, all of which clinical governance seeks to address³². Despite reported inadequacy in IT knowledge and skills among HIM professionals in Nigeria, they hold HIT valuable in reshaping healthcare systems and they have demonstrated continuing quest to acquire required HIT knowledge and skills^{27,33-36}. Studies have recommended increase in the number of Health IT-skilled HIM professionals, advanced Health IT training for these professionals and curriculum

strengthening in order to enhance healthcare data management and improve healthcare system in Nigeria^{27,37}. Similarly, other studies opined that availability of enhanced training including adequate practical demonstration and better clinical integration will improve their learning experience³⁸. Studies identify growing awareness on Health IT and need for further and regulated training and practice among these professionals^{39,40}. Furthermore, studies suggested that new ways should be charted to take training of HIM professionals to the next level.^{41,42}.

To achieve high quality and high reliability healthcare services, Braithwaite & Travaglia recommended accountability, continuous improvement, quality assurance, continuous education and that professionals should uphold their professional and work ethics⁶.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

It is noteworthy to say that clinical and information governance are necessary to ensure good health records practice. More importantly, patient's health records and Health IT are tools necessary for effective clinical governance capable of evolving enhanced healthcare services in Nigeria. There is therefore the need to invest in the training of HIM professionals for an improved healthcare data management. Governments at all levels and health sector stakeholders are urged to provide enabling environment for the implementations.

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Authors Contribution:

UMA conceived of the study, initiated its design, participated in data analysis and coordination and reviewed the final manuscript. AIT participated in the design, conducted literature search, article selection and review, data analysis and coordination and drafted the manuscript.

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