Patients and their health records: one entity in two manifests

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Abstract

Background: Patients' health records are essential for good healthcare provision. The quality depends on accurate and prompt documentation of the care provided. Regular analysis of records' contents is essential for improving quality of care. This paper look at patients input into the management of their health records.

Methodology/Results: Searches into literatures on patients' confidence into how their health records are documented and secured in the hospital are the paramount focus of this study. The outcomes revealed that patients level of awareness of how their health records are being used in researches are increasing. The patients' supports in this will be enhanced as they have access to their health records too, thereby affording them to play active roles in their care management. However, patients were concerned about reduced confidentiality with their records held on computer.

Conclusion: The researchers concluded that to respect patients' autonomy, privacy and consent choices, efforts should be geared toward health-services users' active roles in their care process. One way is to facilitate patients having gainful access to their records and a standard and documented way of obtaining consents from them to use the records in research. These will go a long way in evolving better health outcome and in effect, improved healthcare quality.

Keywords: Access; Confidentiality; Health Records; Privacy; Protected Health Information

Introduction

The patient's health record is an important compilation of facts about his/her life and health. It includes documented data on past and present illnesses and treatment written by health care professionals caring for the patient.[1,2] The health records are essential for good healthcare and their quality depends on accurate and prompt documentation of the care provided.[3] Though, the hospital generates and takes custody of the records, the patients are the reasons the health records are initiated.[4-7] Health records are the visible evidence of the clinical activities and the regular analysis of contents contributed to the hospital's accomplishments. Such achievements are a valuable resource for enabling patients' participation in their healthcare.[8,9] Since they are the basis of any health institution, documentation of every contact of each patient with a healthcare provider must be comprehensive and robust to the scrutiny of auditors or attorneys.[8] This review elucidates the relationship between the patients and their health records as two sides of a coin. The review, though not exhaustive, discusses the importance patients attached to their health records and how such should be handled.

Methodology/Results

The review into patients' confidence on how their health records are documented and secured in the hospital was attained by searches of relevant literatures. The outcomes revealed that patients level of awareness of how their health records are being used in researches are increasing. The proper engagement of patients in this will earn their supports in facilitating documentation of enriching the illness stories. This will be enhanced as patients started having access to their health records too, thereby affording them to play active roles in their care management. The findings and import will be discussed under successive headings.

Patients' health records management in the contemporary healthcare settings

Lately, it has been argued that the management of health records should not solely be in the hands of competent professionals. This had been attributed some skilled handlers who do not understand their respective responsibilities toward good health records practice with gross inadequacies in the documentation processes.[3,10-16] The aforementioned challenges facing patients' health records have propelled several calls for computerization of health records and information management processes. Interestingly, studies have revealed that most healthcare settings especially from low and middle income countries like Nigeria are not computerized and that handlers of patients' health records lack the right computing skills to effectively handle computerized healthcare systems.[17-23] Nevertheless, there have been quests for training and retraining among health records professionals, an indication for good health records practice.[24-26]

Patients always want satisfactory services and when they are involved in the management of their health records, they play active and collaborative role for a better care management.[9,27] Although some patients find reading their medical notes confusing or offensive, involving them directly in the management of their care has been described as a means of securing interactive and accountable technologies.[28,29] Patients nowadays are expected to interact with the information in their health records outside the health care facilities and even share their health information with others.[30]

When patients are granted access to their health records

Patients have right to information contained in their health records but, gaining access to such records is often a challenge.[28,35] In spite of their level of education and involvement in their care, most patients found viewing their health records useful and understood most of the content, though they sought for explanations on some confusing medical terms and abbreviations.[31] This beckons on physicians and other care givers to take time to explain the language in use and to be more respectful in written notes.[28] Many of these patients believe that viewing their health records translates into care-related decisions and actions, and they wish they could add personal information to the records.[31,32] Although many patients found medically insignificant errors in their records, the majority were satisfied that the health information contained in their health records was complete and accurate.[33] However, some patients are worried by the idea of seeing their own health records as they might not be able accommodate viewing their abnormal test results. Some other groups of patients are concerned about the security and confidentiality of their records.[31,33] Overall, patients' access to their health records will afford them to play active roles in their care management. Therefore, caregivers should work in partnership with patients to develop systems essential to their success.

When patients' health record is used in research

Patients have confidence that their health records is not only secured in the hospital, but are also aware that their caregivers use their health records in research which they are supportive as such research should help improve the quality of health care.[36,39,43,44] However, some patients would frowned when their health records were used for research purposes without getting informed consent from them.[36,41] Despite their want of exclusive consent, their trust and knowledge about the use of their health records in research tend to make them recommend less-stringent process to obtain consent.[36,39,41]

Considering the public varying preferences, especially in obtaining individual's consent, this presents logistical challenges in using patients' health records in research.[41] Therefore, systems for obtaining permission when patients are admitted should be standardized.[45] Nevertheless, emerging regulations on human subjects permit much access to electronic medical records and residual clinical biospecimens without individual informed consent.[43] Resolution of uncertainties surrounding legislation on the use of information would be helpful to clinicians.[45]

When patients' health record is held on computer or in the Cloud

Keeping patients' health records on computers or other technologically-driven media have offered the patients invaluable advantages. For example, care card, which is an electronic replica of physical records, empowers patients by giving them access to their own health records. With care card, a patient can see the records, read it, and could choose to obtain the readers which give them access to it.[44] However, patients were concerned about reduced confidentiality with their records held on computer.[45,46] They expressed concerns about loss of confidentiality when doctors used these systems. Those with experience of computers were more aware of the limitations of computers in terms of error, breakdown and potential loss of confidentiality but despite more knowledge of these problems, they still favoured use of computers in consultation.[47] Just that they want granular privacy control over sharing of information from therein.[48]

Patients worry about the confidentiality of their computer record and it seems that those less familiar with computers, belonging to the female gender and those less aware of their GP's actions at the computer worry more.[49] Protecting patient confidentiality becomes the personal responsibility of every participating patient.[50] By placing the patient at the center of healthcare data exchange and empowering the patient to become the steward of their own data.[50] Many patients opined that electronic format could ease record access and eliminate the problem of griffonage (incomprehensible handwriting). For maximum usefulness to patients, personal health records (PHRs) data may need to be comprehensive.[51] PHR has the potential to create a more complete and balanced view of the patient because it is owned, controlled and managed by the patient.[52] Providing patient control of healthcare information exchange is appealing in PHRs as it solves many of the privacy and consent issues faced by organizations desiring to exchange data today.[49]

Implications for health records management and healthcare services

Although records viewed by patients today are most likely to be in paper format, which provides limited opportunity for comprehension support, record access improves shared management, improved interactions with healthcare providers, improved health outcomes and quality patients' decision making for improved care quality.[53] This is crucial for both the integrity of healthcare and biomedical research. In addition, patients need to trust their physicians, other care providers and health institutions. They need not to unnecessarily become suspicious or offensive that activities of potential interest to them especially as it affects their health records are being conducted without their knowledge.[54] It is good to note that involving patients in their care process is a means of securing interactive and accountable technologies capable of improving their healthcare and influencing health outcomes.[29]

Conclusion

Patients highly value confidentiality of their health records but they also recognize the high worth of health records research. It can be said that the patients and his health records are inseparably-linked elements. To respect patients' autonomy, privacy and consent choices therefore, efforts should be geared toward their active roles in their care process, gainful access to their records and a standard and documented way of obtaining consents for use in research. These will go a long way in evolving better health outcome and in effect, improved healthcare quality.

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