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Making the Case for Electronic Personal Health Records

By Evan Schwarzwald, D.O., F.A.C.C.

One is rarely prepared for a medical emergency. My wife's grandmother called our home late one night, frantic. Her husband had been taken to the emergency room, and, in her panicked state, she forgot his medication list. However, within seconds, his medical information — a lengthy medication log, list of allergies, records of past surgeries and more — was blinking on a computer screen. Using an Internet-based electronic personal health record (EPHR), we were able to access his medical information and provide it to the treating physicians. This scenario could play out daily in emergency rooms across the country, but most patients do not have their medical information in an electronic format.

EPHR Advantages

Electronic personal health records clearly have advantages over lengthy, unwieldy paper records because they can grant immediate access to medication logs, radiology reports and more in an emergency, potentially resulting in decreased medical errors.

Beyond an emergency, EPHRs can ease the information sharing between patient and physician. Instead of waiting for records to be transferred from one physician to another, patients can provide immediate access to crucial information, thus ensuring continuity of care and assisting the treating physician in making informed decisions.

EPHR Availability

Several different types of EPHRs exist. Some medical insurance companies are providing this service to their subscribers. Some EPHR software programs are available for personal computers. However, their disadvantages are that access to the information is limited to that computer, and the software can be expensive.

Internet-based EPHRs are probably the most useful programs because of their multiple advantages. If the site is SSL security approved, it is

as safe and private as an online merchant or bank account.

Internet-based systems are easily accessed via a computer with an Internet connection, a Blackberry or PDA. Also important, personal EPHRs are owned by the patient and access to the data is controlled by the patient, in contrast with EPHRs that are owned by an insurance company. To see an excellent example of an Internet-based EPHR database, go to www.MedicalRecords247.com, which is free and user friendly.

Regardless of the system, some effort is required on the part of the individual. Collecting medical records and scanning them into a database is an ongoing process that requires upkeep. Electronic personal health records are the next step in the revolution of health care information technology. Unlike other industries, health care record keeping has been slow to join the electronic age, but its time has come, and every indication is there that it will be an asset to both patients and physicians. Cardiovascular professionals should encourage patients to establish electronic personal health records and consider doing the same for themselves. These types of records can help save lives.

Schwarzwald is with Great Neck Medical Group, Great Neck, New York.



UnitedHealthcare Extends Imaging Accreditation Deadline

UnitedHealthcare has extended the deadline for requiring accreditation of specific cardiac imaging services to the third quarter of 2008. The initial deadline was March 1. The ACC played a key role in getting the extension. UnitedHealthcare will notify providers a minimum of 30 days before accreditation becomes effective in their area or as otherwise required by regulation. Additional information about the imaging accreditation initiative is available online at: www.UnitedHealthcareOnline.com.