Personal Health Records and Patient Portals

Nicole Hawkins, Matt Reid, Mark Simaga, Jahanzeb Syed, Isolina Vargas

Northwestern University MED_INF 403

Health care providers and their patients have a variety of options for sharing and retrieving medical data via information technology applications and devices, with the primary goal of promoting and maintaining good health. A patient portal provides communication between patients and providers via a secure Web based gateway to provider practice information and services (EMR Experts, 2011). However, the portal limits patient access to specific information that is managed by their provider. Personal health records (PHR) are primarily under the control of the patient, who determines what information to include and how often that information should be updated. An electronic personal health record is a collection of a patient’s information that is accessible anytime via a Web-enabled device, such as a computer, phone or tablet and enables patients to assess their health and prepare for physician visits (Mayo Clinic, 2011). Patient portals in combination with Web based PHR allow patients to be more involved in multiple aspects of their health care, from requesting prescription refills to submitting a blood pressure reading. Providers should consider including patient portals and Web based PHR prior to implementation of any clinical information system as these tools provide support for patient self management activities and facilitate timely patient access to information.

Patients with chronic illnesses such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and heart failure play a crucial role in managing factors that affect their health status (Pearson, Mattke, Shaw, Ridgely & Wiseman, 2007). Actions such as blood sugar monitoring for
diabetics or the self-assessment of progress for heart disease are central to the patient’s overall wellness. With the development of more integrated health systems and more widespread access to the Internet, web-based personal health records (PHR) and organization specific patient portals are an important self-management tool.

Four out of five U.S. adults believe that online PHRs could help them manage their health care (Westin, 2008). Considering over 145 million people, almost half of all U.S. citizens, suffer from at least one chronic illness, there is a large potential benefit to indisposed individuals by supplementing at-home care with electronic management systems (ICIC, 2011). Patient portals, tied to specific health care organizations, can provide instant access to a variety of medical data and information. The patient medical note, reflecting prescribed medication and patient-provider dialogue, is the most useful aspect of patient portals relating to self-managed care. These notes could contain specific instructions for exercise or dietary changes essential to the management of chronic illnesses. The anytime availability of online access to lost or misinterpreted instructions is another key feature of patient portals. In addition, the ability to interface a patient’s portal with their PHR provides a long-term repository for clinical information independent of the health care organization.

Chronically ill patients need support to help them manage their illnesses as effectively as possible (Pearson et al., 2007). Patient portals provide limited self-management functionality and are not necessarily connected to other providers’ medical systems, thus limiting the ability to share information. Bridging this gap requires the addition of a PHR that can interface with disparate systems ranging from providers to pharmacies. Patients with chronic illnesses will need the ability to “track their diseases in
conjunction with their providers, promoting earlier interventions when they encounter a deviation or problem” (Tang, Ash, Bates, Overhage & Sands, 2006). Patients who utilize PHR tracking and reporting functions can visually identify out of range vital signs and fluctuating self-diagnostic measures faster with enhanced reporting features. Moreover, on the horizon are at-home monitoring systems linked to PHR interfaces that provide real time medical information updates and physician or emergency service alerting capabilities.

PHRs also have the capability to provide self-managed wellness tools helping moderately ill and healthy people take a more active role in their own health (Tang et al., 2006). Individuals who set personal goals can use their PHR to monitor vital signs and calculate body mass index. Along with charting accomplishments, another PHR benefit is the ability to access credible health information, knowledge and data that is customized for an individual’s lifestyle (Tang et al., 2006). This information, along with yearly physical exam data exported via their patient portal, can provide the basis for next generation PHR decision support systems. These systems can provide patients with answers to common questions based on available medical knowledge and their individual medical history. The ultimate goal of patient self-management is the ability to make informed health decisions and proactively monitor their health status.

Aside from the administrative features that patient portals and PHRs offer, the extension of these portals to include E-visits and/or clinical messaging has increased the patient’s access to care. Both of these tools offer patients the opportunity to access health care and information from the convenience of their own home if they are disabled, lack transportation, or are otherwise unable to get to a doctor’s office.
E-visit is a fee for service option that patients can use when they want to schedule a “virtual” office visit as an alternative to physically traveling to their physician’s office. The patient would request an E-visit through the online patient portal. At that point they would supply their credit card information for billing purposes. A healthcare provider receives the request and either approves the E-visit or declines the request and tells the patient they must be seen in-person because they do not meet the E-visit criteria. E-visit criteria require the patient to select a provider he/she has already seen before and the visit cannot be urgent in nature or require an in-person encounter. The most common e-visits are for chronic condition follow-up such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and depression and acute episodes of chronic conditions such as back pain (Walters, Barnard & Paris, 2006).

According to a recent poll, almost 90 percent of patients with internet access would like to communicate via email with their physicians (HarrisInteractive, 2002). Clinical messaging is a secure online communication tool between the patient and their physician. It is used by patients to ask questions or provide relevant information to be included in their medical record. The Dartmouth-Hitchcock experience with patient portals found that this was the most popular feature of the communication element in the patient portal (Walters, Barnard & Paris, 2006).

Enhancing patient-physician communication and providing self health management opportunities are the primary reasons to include PHR in a provider information system as a focal point of health care and disease management. Global access to the patient portal at anytime and from anywhere in the world caters to the desire for
efficient and easily accessible healthcare services which fits perfectly in today’s consumer life style.

In addition to all the technological benefits of PHR’s and Patient Portals, bridging the communication gap between physician and patient is critically important in a society of different beliefs, colors, and cultures. The ability to communicate through PHR’s and portals will promote understanding and significantly enhance the healthcare system. Providers who wisely adopt PHR will have more productive and engaging interactions with their patients and patients who use PHR will reap significant rewards in terms of improved health and quality of life.

Reducing medical errors and unnecessary tests, enhancing patient-physician communication, establishing self health management opportunities, originating medication reminders, bringing convenience to drug refill requests, creating global access to the portal from anywhere in the world, all contributed to a greater need for a PHR as a point of care, wellness and disease management. The portal caters the need for improving healthcare services which fits perfectly in today’s consumer life style.
References


