THE MEANINGFUL USE CHRONICLES: CONTINUITY OF CARE OR MANAGING POPULATION HEALTH

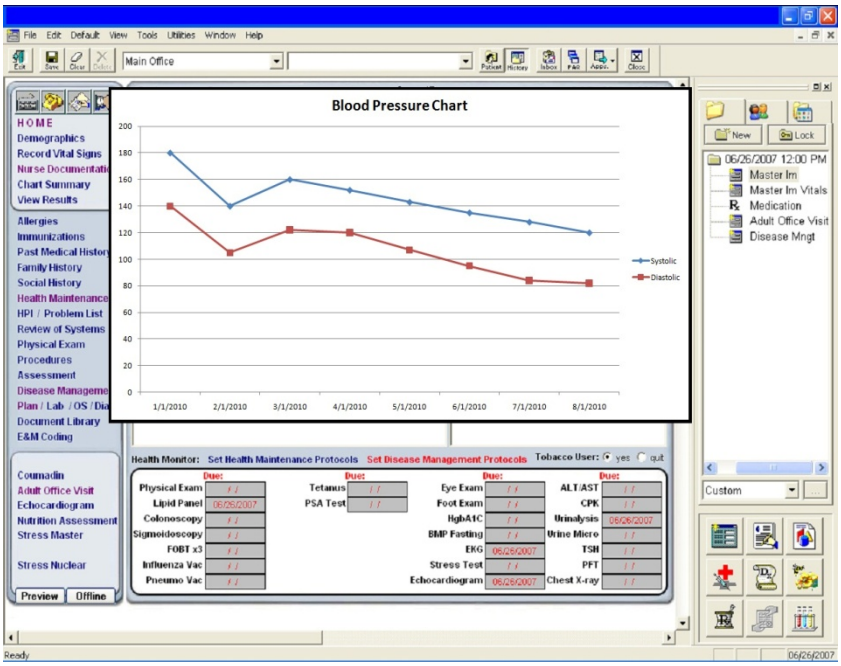
E-mail, voice mail, snail mail. While many Americans complain that they just can't get away from ringing phones or a constant barrage of emails, some of the country's most vulnerable citizens can't be reached – even with vital information pertaining to their health. But when health care providers at Heartland Health Outreach were able to use the electronic health record system to flag the abnormal mammogram results of a homeless patient, Dr. Stephanie Luther knew the power of paperless records went far beyond saving trees.

"The ability to share patient information is vital in an organization like Heartland…many of our patients don't have phones or any way to reach them," says Dr. Luther, medical director of primary care at Heartland Health Outreach, which provides health services to more than 15,000 patients, many of them homeless, every year. "We were not able to contact the woman with the abnormal mammogram, but she showed up at another outreach site, and the results were there on the computer."

With 50 sites within the Heartland network, the ability to view patient histories and test results on an electronic system is not only more efficient, says Dr. Luther, but allows physicians to provide better care. "The most obvious benefit is having all that information at your fingertips, but it has an effect on health outcomes in individuals and populations."

Data in Action

Since Heartland implemented electronic medical records in December 2006, Dr. Luther says that blood pressure control in the organization's patient population has improved dramatically. In addition, providers have been able to use the system to graph data and show patients how interventions – such as medications – have improved outcomes. "I love that – it's positive reinforcement."



And because Heartland provides dental care and mental health services, the electronic medical records have made integrated care of a transient population not only possible, but easy. "I can find out if my patient has seen the dentist and if that impacts what the patient needs from me."

Electronic medical records also have contributed to more positive physician-patient interactions, higher-level patient engagement and more efficient use of resources, according to Dr. Luther. Heartland not only converted patient records to an electronic system, but also instituted an electronic practice management system for making appointments, billing and other operations.

"Our patients are impressed {with the electronic health records}," says Dr. Luther. "They see that we've made a commitment to their healthcare."

For comprehensive information on meaningful use, visit the Chicago Health Information Technology Regional Extension Center website at www.chitrec.org.

And all of it adds up to "meaningful use." The Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health Act (HITECH Act) allocates $19 billion for hospitals and physicians who demonstrate "meaningful use" of electronic health records. Under the HITECH Act, many of the criteria used to determine meaningful use, such as the use of technology for clinical documentation or e-prescribing, are designed to lead to better health outcomes, improved continuity of care and enhanced population health management.

Getting to Meaningful Use

Dr. Luther supervised a medical clinic for the homeless while on the faculty at Rush University School of Medicine and began collaborating with Heartland in 2008. By the time she came on board as medical director in March 2009, the organization had already converted patient medical records to an electronic system – a process that began in 2006.

According to Dr. Luther, two things were paramount in the success of Heartland's conversion to electronic health records. Number one was a thorough evaluation of best practices and determining what worked and what didn't in the current patient record keeping and data system.

"If you can do that thoughtfully, you're starting a new system at its best," says Dr. Luther.

Second, was working in partnership with an outside resource, the Alliance of Chicago.

The Alliance of Chicago's commitment to using information technology to improve the quality of medical care in underserved populations, makes them the perfect match for Heartland, according to Fred Rachman, CEO of the Alliance of Chicago. "Heartland is delivering on the promise of health care technology improving not only the access and efficiency of care, but the quality."

Focus on Better Care

The tangible evidence that electronic medical records have helped Heartland is all around – from improved blood pressure control to more exam rooms where paper records used to take up space. Even staff members who were once assigned to keeping track of paper medical records are free to contribute to other activities more closely involved in patient care.

Since Heartland serves a diverse immigrant and refugee population, the electronic system also makes it simpler to provide health education and questionnaires to patients in various languages. In some instances, patients see the electronic medical records as a "second opinion" because interactive questionnaires between provider and patient provide diagnosis support, explains Dr. Luther.

Electronic Health Records Helping Provide Improved Health Care

- ✓ **Better care coordination**
- ✓ **Managing population health**
- ✓ **Quality reporting**
- ✓ **Clinical decision support**

"There's not a single provider who doesn't think that this has been a benefit," say Dr. Luther of the 11 primary care physicians and five dentists at Heartland. Dr. Luther acknowledges that there's still some reluctance among physicians, especially because of cost, to make the switch to electronic medical records. However, the freedom to concentrate attention on the patients being served is priceless.

"If you have to spend half a visit looking for a test result, you're not able to provide the best care," says Dr. Luther, adding that while electronics medical records don't make a doctor better, it allows for doctors to give better care.

Heartland Health Outreach, Alliance of Chicago and Regional Extension Center Working Together

Heartland Health Outreach and its clinics are currently working with the Alliance of Chicago and their local regional extension center, CHITREC, to continue optimizing the electronic health records systems. CHITREC will be providing consultation and assistance to help Heartland achieve the next phases of meaningful use of EHRs including applications like e-prescribing and provide guidance through the CMS reimbursement process.

About Heartland Health Outreach

At its many sites around the city, Heartland Health Outreach provides primary care, oral health care, mental health services, treatment for torture survivors, health care interpreting services, and training and technical assistance for service providers to the homeless. Heartland Health Outreach primarily serves homeless and immigrant/refugee populations, such as those from Ethiopia, Liberia, Burma, Congo, Haiti, Cambodia, Bosnia, and Russia. It cares for more than 15,000 patients annually.

About CHITREC

The Chicago Health Information Technology Regional Extension Center (CHITREC) is a collaboration between Northwestern University and the Alliance of Chicago Community Health Services, with the support of more than 40 local and national organizations focused on HIT adoption and use needs within the city of Chicago. CHITREC brings together resources and provides consultation, education and provisioning services to help primary care providers achieve meaningful use of electronic health records. By understanding the technical and regulatory environment, CHITREC assesses individual and network needs and bridges the gaps by effectively directing appropriate resources.

About the Alliance of Chicago

Founded in 1997, the Alliance of Chicago was formed to realize the opportunities for groups of safety net organizations to cooperate. The mission of the Alliance is to share resources and integrate services in order to more efficiently and effectively deliver accessible, quality health care to the communities it serves. The Alliance's strategic vision is to continue promoting the thoughtful use of Health Information Technology in the Safety Net to promote access, improve quality and efficiency.

CHITREC

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