The Need for Centralized Medical Records

Consolidating your family’s medical records is one important step you can take to help insure your loved ones receive the best healthcare. In this era of medical specialization, the availability of centralized medical records can make a crucial difference in outcomes.

Accurate, centralized medical records can yield better care anywhere in the world

If you're like most people, you receive your healthcare from more than one doctor—a family medicine specialist, an OB/GYN if you’re a woman, perhaps a dermatologist, an orthopedist, or a cardiologist. That means the records each physician gathers on your health and treatment are scattered across offices all over town, perhaps even all over the region. Of course, you do your best to inform each doctor of all of your conditions, tests, and treatments, but it's hard to remember everything during an appointment and sometimes you may not know what information is germane.

Not having access to your complete medical record has consequences, some simply a nuisance, others potentially life threatening. You have to repeat your health and family history to each new doctor you see. Tests may be unnecessarily repeated, wasting your time and money. Symptoms may be overlooked leading to an inaccurate diagnosis. Dangerous combinations of medications may be accidentally prescribed and cause serious health problems.

There’s a solution to the problem of scattered medical records that’s receiving a good deal of attention from health professionals and insurers as well as from the U.S. government—the consolidation of medical records to create a complete personal health profile.

Americans want centralized, accessible health records

The Markle Foundation, a private foundation that focuses on accelerating the use of information and communication technologies to improve people’s lives particularly in health and national security, has studied the question of whether Americans would like to have centralized medical records accessible via the Internet. The study found over 70% of those questioned believe these records would improve the quality of care they receive.

Physicians would also like to have access to more complete centralized records. With all of a patient’s medical history in one easily accessible place, physicians could work from more complete data, speeding the pace of diagnosis and getting treatment underway sooner. A consolidated record would also provide the physician with "the big picture," including family history, medications prescribed and any reactions or potential interactions, lifestyle factors such as exercise, diet, and smoking, and more. The end result would be safer, more effective, more efficient care.
"In this day and age, it's all about communication," believes Dr. William Queale, an internist who treats patients in his concierge practice in suburban Maryland. "As a primary care physician, an important part of my job is to coordinate the care my patients receive. Most see a number of sub-specialists and I need the information from those other doctors consolidated and readily available to me to make decisions. Otherwise the information remains fragmented and details could fall through the cracks and make the delivery of healthcare less efficient."

For most, consolidated medical records are still years away

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act passed in 2009 includes $17.2 billion to encourage health care providers to maintain all patient medical records electronically. The goal is for every American to have an electronic medical record by 2014. But according to an article in the New England Journal of Medicine, less than two percent of acute care hospitals in the U.S. currently have a comprehensive electronic medical records system in place, while just four percent of physicians’ practices have such a system up and running.

There are some major efforts to create electronic medical records underway, including one by health insurer Kaiser Permanente. In addition, the Cleveland Clinic provides patients with an online medical record. Called MyChart, the system allows patients to view portions of their medical records, including lab results and vital signs, manage appointments and prescription renewals, and share health information with physicians to whom they grant access. Cleveland Clinic recently partnered with Google to offer MyChart users access to Google Health which allows you to input your own medical record information from any provider at any hospital.

Similar to Google Health, Microsoft also offers no-charge online health record collection tool called HealthVault, but the potential pitfall is that both rely on the patient to input information and keep that information up-to-date.

Centralized medical records yield better treatment and peace of mind

While there are a number of medical records centralization projects on the drawing board and in the early stage of implementation around the country, members of PinnacleCare Private Health Advisory are reaping the many benefits of centralized records today.

Members' records are carefully gathered, comprehensively reviewed by a PinnacleCare physician, compiled, and scanned into a computer to create a digital record to which members and their physicians have fast, secure access. Each member’s original paper records are stored in a locked, fireproof vault.

When a Pinnacle member recently saw a specialist for kidney problems, the physician was amazed that he had brought his complete medical history with him. The doctor commented that with the full records immediately available, he was able to provide a much better, more efficient level of care to the member.
Because the information is in a compact digital format, it can easily be transferred at any time to any location around the globe if the need arises. There is also a highly secure online site that allows access to a member's complete health record anywhere there’s Internet access.

That around-the-clock, around-the-world access is especially valuable to people who travel. Two PinnacleCare members who live on their yacht for several months each year off the coast of Panama and Costa Rica feel more secure knowing their medical records are always within reach. PinnacleCare compiled complete medical records for each member of the family and also provided them with information on the best doctors and medical facilities near their ports of call. The couple now travels with the knowledge that, should they fall ill or be injured while away from home, they can easily and promptly be connected with the best healthcare available.

The attention of a personal health advisor makes a difference

In addition to centralizing each member's medical records, PinnacleCare offers something none of the other medical records consolidation projects provide—the attention, expertise, and advice of a personal PinnacleCare health advisor team. This specialized and professional team reviews members' records at the beginning of the membership and they often note important conditions or symptoms members forget to mention to their physicians or find out that needed follow-up testing has not occurred.

That was the case for a healthy, active 24-year-old PinnacleCare member who recently broke his collarbone and had surgery to repair it. During his recovery, he fainted. After reviewing his medical records, his PinnacleCare health advisor noted the member had a longstanding history of fainting and informed his surgeon. Instead of assuming the one episode of fainting was related to taking pain medicine on an empty stomach, the member was seen for a complete neurological evaluation to determine whether the fainting was related to the surgery, or was, in fact, a separate issue.

Another PinnacleCare health advisor found a physician's note in a member’s records recommending follow up for elevated cholesterol levels, but found no further follow up had been completed. After checking with the member and learning that the issue was never resolved, the PinnacleCare health advisor immediately scheduled an appointment with the member's physician for testing. The physician then prescribed the appropriate medication and the member’s cholesterol is now under control.

By combining the benefits of complete, centralized medical records with the personal attention provided by a PinnacleCare health advisor, PinnacleCare members are years ahead in their quest for the most effective, efficient care for themselves and their families.