Continuous Healing Relationships Through Connectivity

As the Nation Edges to Widespread Implementation of EMRs, Physicians Are Concerned About Weakening the Important Doctor-Patient Relationship

As the nation edges closer to widespread implementation of electronic medical records, physicians worry about whether new technology will weaken the doctor-patient relationship.

A recent survey brought to light that a stunning 96 percent of physician participants voiced fear “about losing the unique patient story with the transition to point-and-click (template-driven) EHRs.” At Kaiser Permanente, both doctors and patients have found the opposite to be true: when used correctly, electronic health records can amplify, deepen, and expand the doctor-patient relationship.

In its seminal report, Crossing the Quality Chasm: A New Health System for the 21st Century, the Institute of Medicine outlined 10 new rules to guide a transition to a higher-quality, more patient-centered health care system. One of those rules is that care should be “based on continuous healing relationships.” The traditional paradigm is that health-care is provided primarily through medical office visits, but the IOM challenges us to aspire to a system in which patients “receive care whenever they need it and in many forms, not just face-to-face visits”—the point being that “the health care system should be responsive at all times (24 hours a day, every day) and that access to care should be provided over the Internet, by telephone, and by other means in addition to face-to-face visits.”

Kaiser Permanente’s comprehensive health information system, called KP HealthConnect, has enabled our clinicians to provide care in just that way. The technology has fundamentally changed the outcomes we seek and the questions we ask. It’s no longer about how many patients we can see, but about how many patients’ problems we can solve.

In 2003, when the leadership of Kaiser Permanente decided to implement an electronic health record, we were not looking to just convert paper charts to electronic charts. We were looking to utilize technology in innovative ways to prevent illness, provide excellent care, be more compassionate caregivers, and truly transform the way we deliver care. The goal we set for ourselves was audacious, and the journey has required a commitment to supporting the doctor-patient relationship from design through implementation.

Transitioning to a comprehensive system presented a number of challenges—from the development of the technology’s configuration to the process of implementation and the placement of the computers in the physical environment. To ensure the success of this new strategic imperative that was KP HealthConnect, the organization developed a “collaborative build,” which involved hundreds of national and regional leaders in decision-making about the configuration and implementation of the system. In order for the system to aid in the practice of medicine—to expand our clinicians’ capabilities and bring doctors and patients closer together—it was essential that the clinicians who would be using the system be involved in its configuration.

Our physicians initially had some very real anxieties and skepticism about how it would affect their practice, but with visible support from leadership, clarity about our mission, and the excitement of early adopters, enthusiasm for the system and its capabilities grew among our clinicians. To ensure that the computer equipment would not literally come between doctors and patients, we placed major emphasis on the placement of workstations in exam rooms, positioning them so that, wherever possible, they physically brought the clinician and patient together looking at the screen together. We taught clinicians techniques for connecting with patients in training and in change man-
management approaches. “We know you” was part of the underlying goal for the implementation and became the mantra for physicians and staff to demonstrate with members.

The feedback we hear from our patients is resoundingly positive when it comes to electronic health records and online personal health record capabilities. They love the system for many reasons, but we find that three themes come up very consistently:

1. **Stronger relationships.** Because patients have choices in how they access clinicians and can do so on their own schedule, we find that our members are more likely to come to us with health questions and updates. And because patients are using e-mail so frequently, they are actually communicating with clinicians more often than they did before. If anything, these online tools have strengthened the doctor-patient relationship.

2. **Saving time and money.** Access to My Health Manager on kp.org saves our members two valuable commodities: time and money. Rather than spending time during work hours to contact their doctor’s office and having to take time off from work to attend an appointment, a member can e-mail their doctor, check on lab results, review instructions from their previous office visits, and order prescription refills right from kp.org.

3. **Consumer empowerment.** With secure e-mail messaging, patients can communicate with their doctors at any time, from anywhere. Demonstrating the growing consumer interest in online health management, our patients send more than 650,000 secure e-mail messages each month to our doctors and care teams.

One patient testimonial illustrates how our electronic health record makes our patients feel more connected to their physicians and more in charge of their health: “The value of the system for me has been feeling like I have a better relationship with my physician—much more direct access to my physician than I’ve had before. But I also feel like I’ve been able to own my health-care in ways that I haven’t been able to own it before. Before, healthcare was something that happened at a hospital, and it was something that wasn’t integrated into your life, and having access to things right here in the house from my computer makes me feel much more empowered in owning my own healthcare.” –Holly Jacobson, Kaiser Permanente member (From video: Kaiser Permanente HealthConnect at Home –Empowering People http://www.youtube.com/kaiserpermanenteorg%p/u/16/0ByUhzSm5As)

Similarly, our physicians feel that the way they are able to use technology to communicate with their patients enhances their relationships. A physician from our Elk Grove Medical Center says of e-mail communications with one of her patients: “The technology has really allowed us to develop a very, very personal relationship—very quick responses back and forth… Somewhere I just feel like I know her that much better than before.” –Lisa Liu, MD (From video: Kaiser Permanente HealthConnect at Home –Transforming Access http://www.youtube.com/kaiserpermanenteorg%p/u/17/15xDpNOuFxg)

KP HealthConnect is a tool that can transform the quality, service and efficiency of health-care delivery. The world of health-care has become increasingly complex over the past few decades. Physicians are faced with patients with co-morbidities and an explosion of medical information. We need better systems, better support, and better resources to help physicians manage the complexities and provide high-quality, personalized care. KP HealthConnect provides a number of dynamic clinical decision support tools that aid our physicians and their teams in delivering the best possible care to their patients.

When we ask our physicians what they want to see in the future, it isn’t less connectivity. They want to use technology to connect with their patients sooner, faster, with better and richer information, and ultimately, before they are needed. With our comprehensive EHR, we can care for our patients even when they are not in front of us. Through our efforts to identify care gaps and encourage patients to receive the necessary screenings, we have caught life-threatening diseases early enough to save patients’ lives.

It is understandable that physicians have very real anxieties and fears about what effect an electronic medical record could have on their practices and their relationships with their patients. An IT system can be seen as an intrusion into the exam room—an extra burden that comes between physicians and their patients. However, when physicians are involved in the configuration of a comprehensive EHR that contains robust clinical capabilities, they come to see it as an essential tool in the practice of medicine and care of their patients, one that they are unwilling to give up once they have experienced its capacity for transformation.

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REFERENCES

3. Ibid.