



Quality Medical Charts: The Importance of Proper Medical Record Documentation

By Nancy Stimpfel, TransformMED Research Nurse

A medical practice's patient record serves many purposes but its primary function is to plan for patient care and provide for continuity in information about a patient's medical treatment. In my experience auditing medical records from the family medicine offices participating in the TransformMED National Demonstration Project (NDP), I have observed numerous accounts of medical records which were sub-optimal or had important components that were missing. Below are some anecdotal accounts of things I've seen reviewing medical charts:

Sub-optimal charting:

- Medication allergy fields are left blank instead of "NKDA" or specific medications being listed
- Lack of the use of flowsheets such as those for tracking Health Maintenance, Chronic conditions, Pediatric well-care visits and Immunizations
- Hand written notes carelessly added to charts regarding phone calls, lab work, and correspondence from other professionals, etc
- Lack of quality narrative notes describing conversations they have had with patients regarding treatments and preventative testing
- Indications that unresolved problems from previous office visits are addressed in subsequent visits
- Past Medical Histories not updated

Important Components Missing:

- List of Chronic Problems with dates of diagnoses
- Updated medication lists

Quality medical charting is important in providing high quality care and also because in the current health-care system, a number of patients who believe they have sustained physical or psychological harm as a result of their healthcare provider's negligence bring claims or lawsuits to recover damages. A variety of factors are felt to contribute to patients' decision to sue, but many believe that most claims are the result of a breakdown in the patient-physician relationship.

Professional liability, or medical malpractice claims, generally concern allegations of negligence regarding the rendering of professional services which result in bodily injury. Negligence, in the medical setting, is defined as a departure, either by the acts or omissions of a health care provider from the accepted standards of care.

As a permanent record, the patient's medical record also serves as a legal document for use by an injured patient against other parties or for use in other legal proceedings. Proper documentation in the medical record creates a legal document which accurately and completely reflects the care provided to a patient and in a courtroom setting, it is similar to a witness who gives details of the events which occurred. The rule of thumb is, "If it's not in the record, it didn't happen."

From the risk management perspective, the medical record is an important element in preventing and minimizing the potential adverse consequences of malpractice litigation. It serves as the basis for the defense of malpractice claims and lawsuits. Medical records which are poorly maintained, incomplete, inaccurate, illegible or altered, create questions of fact regarding the treatment given or advised to a patient.

Successful clinical care is a collaborative effort between the patient and physician. Together they must review all diagnostic and treatment options before enacting a plan and the medical record should reflect this shared effort. By doing this, physicians may reduce their risk of allegations by adhering to and routinely updating their facilities standards of care and actively engaging the patient in their own medical treatment and knowledge.

Although this paper is based on my thoughts from what I've observed in the NDP practices, NDP data are currently being reviewed and we will see if the aggregate data support these conclusions or find it to be a blip on the radar screen. If it is indeed true that medical charting is not as high-quality as it should be, it is something we hope will improve through the process of practice improvement being conducted in the NDP.

© 2007 TransforMED. All rights reserved.