Electronic Health Records Offer Improved Security

Many of us have come to accept as fact that life in the 21st century is computerized. Most of our records are now electronic (e.g., banking records, credit records, motor vehicle records and tax records).

Unfortunately, the health care industry has been slow to follow this trend. Most doctors' offices still store patients' records on paper in cumbersome filing systems that take up a lot of space.

This practice is slowly starting to change. Gradually, doctors and others in the health care system are switching to electronic health records systems. Cost has been one hurdle—adoption of any new technology requires some investment—but some of that concern is being ameliorated through government incentives and other means.

Another obstacle for some people has been a concern about whether the security and privacy of their health records might be compromised when those records are stored and exchanged electronically. While this is a legitimate concern, electronic health records actually offer certain security advantages over paper records.

One advantage of electronic health records is that they can be encrypted and stored on password-protected systems that only allow authorized persons to view them. Another advantage is that electronic health record systems provide the capability to track who accessed a record, when it occurred, and what the purpose was for doing so.

Contrast that with paper records. If someone gets hold of your health records on paper, there is no way to tell who it was, when it occurred, and what that person did with that information.

Consider the similarities with banking records. They have been stored electronically for years. If you do banking transactions online, you know you will need a user name and a password to get access to your records. If you suspect a security breach, the bank could determine if and when someone got into your records and even trace the computer from which they were accessed.

On the other hand, if your checkbook falls into someone else's possession, that person could go on quite a spending spree for a while. It can be easier to forge a signature than to crack encryption on a computer.

The privacy and security of health records is also protected by state and federal laws, including the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) Privacy and Security Rules, which established national standards for the protection of health information including information in electronic health records.

The HIPAA Privacy and Security Rules set limits on the use and disclosure of health records, establish safeguards for protecting the privacy of health information to prevent patients'

privacy rights from being violated and balance patient privacy with the need to protect public health.

There are other ways that electronic health records can be more secure than paper records. With electronic records, it is easier for your doctors to back up all their records and store those backups at an off-site location. If a fire or flood were to hit your doctor's office, your paper records could be lost.

You also might feel more secure knowing that an electronic health records system could alert your doctor to potentially harmful combinations of prescription drugs. Still another form of security is the knowledge that your doctor will transmit prescriptions and other information electronically, eliminating the ages' old problem of interpreting doctors' illegible handwriting.

These are just some of the advantages of electronic health records. Everything else in our lives in the 21st century is computerized; our health records should be, too.