Electronic Prescribing May Lower Error Rates

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SEATTLE — Electronic prescribing may be a way to significantly reduce medication errors, according to a study that reviewed records involving 749 private-practice patients and more than 1,000 prescriptions.

The study found an error rate of 3.9% when physicians used electronic prescribing, Martha Simpson, D.O., said at a conference on rural health sponsored by the WONCA, the World Organization of Family Doctors. That compares with medication error rates from hospital studies that range from 3% to 6%, and error rates from studies in the community that have reached as high as 10%.

"This is significantly lower than other reported rates have been," said Dr. Simpson of the department of family medicine at Ohio University College of Osteopathic Medicine, Athens.

The study involved four group practices in Ohio, which were given equipment (Rcopia, DrFirst Inc., Rockville, Md.) and training for electronic prescribing to five local pharmacies. The prescriptions were written over a 14-month period. Medical records were then reviewed by a pharmacist, and the patients were telephoned 3 months after their final prescription for an interview to find out if they if they had any adverse events or problems.

The results were not particularly surprising, because a common reason for prescription error is physician handwriting, Dr. Simpson said.

After electronic prescribing becomes more common, it will bring with it unique errors and challenges, she predicted. For example, physicians can easily point their cursors to the wrong box and click, thereby inadvertently canceling a prescription or ordering the wrong one.

The study was sponsored by a grant from the Ohio Medical Quality Foundation. ■