REINVENTING YOUR PRACTICE

Checklist Templates Help With Complex Conditions

Dr. Nasreen Ilias took a somewhat troubling report of her own performance and used it as inspiration to create a reminder system that appears to be improving the care of her patients.

She has created templates for all the things she needs to check and do for patients with complex conditions like diabetes. Her templates easily insert into clinic notes on TouchWorks, an electronic medical records system. The templates help her overcome the problem of "so many patients and so little time, with so much to do," she said in an interview.

A short time ago, Dr. Ilias, an internal medicine resident at Barnes-Jewish Hospital, St. Louis, was asked by her Wohl Clinic supervisor, Dr. Charles Lieu, to take part in a pilot study being done by the National Committee for Quality Assurance. For the study, she submitted cases for the Diabetes Practice Improvement Module and her performance in caring for diabetic patients was evaluated.

She was dismayed to learn that her patient care fell short of the 80% mark established for the module, meaning that she had neglected something that was being used as a marker for quality care for more than 20% of her patients.

Most of the time, it was not that she actually neglected to perform a test or ask a question of a patient; it was that her documentation was incomplete. Nevertheless, Dr. Ilias was determined to do better.

She created templates that include complete quality measures that should be reviewed and documented at clinic visits for various medical conditions. One is for diabetes management. Another is for coronary disease. A third and fourth are for osteoporosis and health maintenance.

She also has some "mini-templates," such as one for monitoring patients on hy-

perthyroidism medication.

Because they are electronic, she can insert the checklists right into the patient's record. That means "it is very easy to just throw in the numbers," she said. "I feel like I am missing fewer things."

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Her diabetes template contains five sections, with the optimal goal value for each section listed underneath that particular heading. The section headings are glycemic control, blood pressure, lipids, antiplatelet therapy, and smoking status.

She also uses the TouchWorks system to send herself reminders to follow up on patients at appropriate intervals and ensure that their medical conditions are optimally managed.

"With these measures, patients are now presenting with better control over medical conditions, increased dedication to weight loss and physical fitness, and more complete and comprehensive health maintenance care," Dr. Ilias said. ■

Wallet Cards Provide a Traveling Medical History

When patients travel, they sometimes need medical attention or end up in the emergency department while far from home.

"With people traveling domestically and internationally now more than ever, you never know where your patients will be when they become ill," said Dr. Chirayu Shah, a third-year resident in internal medicine at Baylor College of Medicine, Houston. "When these patients go to the hospital in a different city, their medical record usually does not follow them."

As a resident, Dr. Shah spends a lot of time in the emergency department. He said that when patients come in, they often mention a preexisting condition but do not have specifics.

Dr. Shah, therefore, suggests that physicians get small, fold-over business cards on which they could print a list of a patient's current diagnoses and medications. The patient could carry the card in his or her wallet.

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The cards would be updated once a year, or more often if necessary. On the outside, the card would say "confidential," and on the inside, the text would include the primary physician's name and telephone number, the date it was printed, and a disclaimer saying that all information should be verified.

In the emergency department, physicians see patients with chest pain who are not exactly sure of their medical history and who may be on warfarin or clopidogrel. They see patients who take a medication but are not sure what it is called—just that it is a square green pill, for example. They see patients who are on pain medications and are obtundent when they come in. "They always say, 'Oh, they told me I have some problem with my kidneys,' " Dr. Shah said. "That helps a little bit, but not much.

"The ER physician has to rely on the patient for accurate medical information, which can often be problematic," he added. "These cards would prove invaluable to ER physicians or even consult physicians." ■

Articles by Tim Kirn, Sacramento Bureau. Look for the next installment of this column in the Dec. 1 issue of INTERNAL MEDICINE NEWS.

Hotline Expands Medicare Advice

The Medicare Rights Center's Professional Hotline has expanded its service to include guidance and advice on Medicare benefits, rights, and options to professionals working with older adults and people with disabilities who are on Medicare.

Until now, the hotline has focused on guidance for Medicare prescription drug benefits through private drug plans. The service is available free, Monday through Friday, from 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. EST, at 877-794-3570. ■