

In the United States, medical information about patients traditionally has been recorded and stored on paper forms. However, there are efforts to persuade doctors to adopt electronic medical record systems in which information about patients is stored in electronic databases rather than on paper. It is argued that storing patients' medical records in electronic databases has several advantages over traditional paper-based record keeping.

Reducing Costs First, the use of electronic records can help reduce costs by saving money on storing and transferring medical records. While paper records require a significant amount of storage space, electronic medical records take up virtually no space. Moreover, by having patients' records computerized in databases, doctors can easily access the records from almost anywhere and can easily duplicate and transfer them when necessary. This costs much less than copying, faxing, or transporting paper records from one location to another.

Preventing Errors Second, electronic medical records are crucial to reducing the chances of medical errors. Illegible handwriting, improper transcription of data, and nonstandard organization of paper records have caused errors that in some cases have had serious consequences for the patients' health. In contrast, electronic records are associated with standardization of forms and legible computer fonts and thus minimize the possibility of human error.

Aiding Research Third, electronic medical records can greatly aid medical research by making it possible to gather large amounts of data from patient records. It is often impractical, impossible, or prohibitively expensive to manually go through thousands of patients' paper records housed in doctors' offices. However, with the existence of electronic medical records, it would be simple to draw out the needed information from the medical databases because the databases are already formatted for data collection. Once in the electronic system, the records could be accessed from any research location.

Now listen to part of a lecture on the topic you just read about. The benefits claimed for electronic medical records are actually very uncertain. First, the cost savings are unlikely to be as significant as the reading suggests. For example, there probably won't be any savings related to record storage. You see, doctors who adopt electronic records usually don't throw out or discontinue the paper records. They keep the paper records as an emergency backup, or because the paper originals with signatures are needed for legal reasons. So, as a result, most doctors who adopt electronic record keeping still have to pay storage costs associated with paper-based record keeping.

Second, electronic medical records cannot eliminate the possibility of errors caused by poor handwriting or by mistakes in the transcription of data. That's because most doctors, including those who've adopted electronic record keeping, still use pen and paper while examining patients. They take notes and write prescriptions by hand. It's usually the office staff of a doctor who enter this information at a later time from the handwritten documents into electronic systems. So, poor handwriting can still lead to errors in the records, since the staff members have to interpret what the doctor has written.

Third—medical research would not necessarily benefit from electronic record keeping. Researchers will still find it difficult to access and use medical information. That's because access to all medical information is subject to strict privacy laws in the United States. Privacy laws exist to allow patients to keep their medical information private if they wish to. As a consequence, researchers who want to collect data from electronic medical records have to

follow strict and complicated procedures and obtain many permissions along the way, including permissions from the patients. And often such permissions are not granted. For example, patients can block the use of their medical records for any purpose other than their own medical treatment.

Summarize the points made in the lecture, being sure to explain how they cast doubt on the specific points made in the reading passage.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? The opinions of celebrities, such as famous entertainers and athletes, are more important to younger people than they are to older people. Use specific reasons and examples to support your answer.