

**Health IT Trends****Electronic health records can help standardize physician handoffs**by **Tamara Wagner, M.D., FAAP**

Reduced residency work hours, physician desire for work-life balance and medical sub-specialization are among the factors fueling the trend toward shift-based care. As a result, nearly all of our patients will experience at least one handoff of care to another physician or medical team.

Although it has advantages, including reduced fatigue and fresh perspective, shift-based care makes it challenging to hand off patients safely. Each handoff represents a vulnerable period where errors in communication or omission of information can have serious consequences for the patient. This reality is magnified for the most complex patients receiving care in emergency departments, intensive care units and inpatient hospital wards.

The Joint Commission and others have identified communication and hand-off errors as the leading contributing factors in sentinel events.

**Dr. Starmer**

"Many research studies have confirmed the high rate of miscommunications and errors resulting from poor quality provider handoffs," said Amy J. Starmer, M.D., M.P.H., FAAP, a leading researcher in medical handoffs. "However, there remains a great need for high-quality research studies that assess the impact of hand-off interventions

on patient outcomes and the comparative effectiveness of various strategies to standardize and improve the hand-off process."

As institutions recognize the importance of a standardized and robust hand-off process, they are focusing on the electronic health record (EHR).

Move toward standardizing handoffs

In a tradition as old as running to the cafeteria before the next flood of admissions, most residents carry in their pockets a hand-typed sign-out paper. This resident-generated document often includes patient name, room number, code status, current medication list and tasks to complete for the next shift. These hand-created hand-off tools are subject to omissions, typos, incomplete updating and frank errors of medical information. Additionally, there is no opportunity to standardize the content or process of handing off medical information.

Innovative institutions are integrating the hand-off process with standardized tools accessible within the EHR. High-quality hand-off integration with the EHR ideally offers the following features:



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Standardized tools in an EHR can help avoid errors in communication or the omission of information when patients are handed off to other professionals.

- automatic integration of vital information such as patient identifier, allergies, medications, code status, reason for admission and medical team members;
- a standardized process for communicating information during handoff of care;
- ability for physicians to enter custom information about the patient such as the "to-do list"; and
- ability for several different teams to enter hand-off information for the patient.

As the impact of handoff of care becomes more widely recognized as a modifiable variable in patient safety, more emphasis will continue to be placed on standardized processes within EHRs. Beyond simply centralizing patient information, EHRs continue to evolve to incorporate dynamic tools needed within our shifting health care environment.

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