

The Benefits of Electronic Medical Records Sound Good, but Privacy Could Become a Difficult Issue

As most people know nothing about EMRs, public opinion will be strongly influenced by reports – whether good or bad – in the media

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The potential benefits of electronic medical records (EMRs) sounds appealing to most people, but when the issue of privacy is raised, many people become concerned about the potential for privacy abuses in EMR systems. However, most have read or heard nothing about EMRs, so public opinion is waiting to be informed.

These are some of the findings of three different surveys, each of which contained some relevant questions on EMRs, which were conducted by Harris Interactive in 2006 and 2005. Two of these surveys were conducted with Dr. Alan F. Westin, Professor of Public Law & Government Emeritus at Columbia University and one of the world's leading authorities on privacy issues in health care and other business and government settings.

In reviewing these results, Dr. Westin commented "Personal medical records have always been rated as highly sensitive by the American public. As programs to automate and interconnect patient medical records across the U.S. health care system proceed, it will be vital to track how patients see this affecting not only the quality and costs of health care, but also the confidentiality, privacy and security of their personal health information."

Public Attitudes Toward Electronic Medical Records

Many people know virtually nothing about the current campaign to adopt EMRs throughout the U.S. healthcare system. Only 29 percent *claim* to have read or heard anything about them. Therefore, it is important to point out that **mass public opinion about EMR systems does not yet exist**. How public opinion develops, as public knowledge and awareness of EMRs grow, will depend therefore on reports in the media on the advantages and disadvantages they offer.

TABLE 1
Public Awareness of Electronic Medical Records

“The Federal government has called for medical and health-care organizations to work with technology firms to create a nationwide system of electronic Medical Records over the next few years. The goal is to improve the effectiveness of patient care, lessen medical errors and reduce the high costs of paper handling. Have you read or heard anything about this program?”

Base: All Adults Who Are Online (September 5 to 7, 2006)

	%
Have read or heard about program	26
Have not read or heard about program	62
Not sure	12

However, even though many people know little or nothing about EMR system developments, many of the potential benefits of EMRs are appealing. A majority of people agree with statements that EMRs hold out the promise of:

- Significantly decreasing medical errors (55%)
- Significantly decreasing healthcare costs (60%)
- Improving the quality of care by reducing unnecessary test and procedures (68%)

A majority also agrees with the suggestion that adoption of EMRs will make it “more difficult to ensure patients’ privacy” (62%).

TABLE 2
Attitudes Toward Electronic Medical Records

“How strongly do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?”

Base: All Adults Who Are Online (September 5 to 7, 2006)

		Agree Strongly/ Somewhat	Agree Strongly
The use of electronic medical records can significantly decrease the frequency of medical errors	%	55	20
The use of electronic medical records can significantly reduce healthcare costs	%	60	25
The use of electronic medical records makes it more difficult to ensure patients’ privacy	%	62	24
The use of electronic medical records can improve the quality of care patients receive by reducing the number of redundant or unnecessary tests and procedures they receive	%	68	30

Most People Want to Use Many of the Services to be Provided by Health Information Technology

While very few people (4% of all adults or less) currently use services to be provided by health information technology, substantial majorities of the public say they would like to be able to:

- Receive reminders to revisit their doctors online (77%)
- Communicate with their doctors by email (74%)
- Schedule appointments online (75%)
- Receive the results of diagnostic tests via email (67%)
- Use home monitoring devices, like blood pressure readings or blood tests, and send results to their doctors' offices by telephone or email (57%)

Overall, a 64 percent majority say, when asked, that they would like to have "an electronic medical record to capture medical information."

TABLE 3

Consumer Access to Technology Now and Interest in Having Access to It

"To what extent do you use, or have access to the following?"

"Which of the following technologies would you like to have access to when seeking care from a doctor or hospital?"

Base: All Adults (September 5 to 7, 2006)

		I Use it Now	I Would Like to Have it
An electronic medical record to capture medical information	%	2	64
Email to communicate directly with my doctor	%	4	74
The ability to schedule a doctor's visit via the Internet	%	3	75
Receiving the results of diagnostic tests via email	%	2	67
A home monitoring device that allows me to send medical information – like blood pressure readings or blood tests – to the doctor's office via the telephone or email	%	2	57
Reminders via email from my doctors when you are due for a visit or some type of medical care	%	4	77

Doctors' Use of Electronic Medical Records and Email Could Help Them Attract Patients

Majorities of all adults say that if they could choose between two doctors, only one of whom used electronic medical records or with whom they could communicate directly by email, that this would influence their choice at least to some extent.

These results suggest that as the health information technology revolution develops, doctors will adopt HIT and EMRs not just for the immediate value to them and their patients, but also to help them grow their practices.

TABLE 4
Potential Impact of Technology Accession Physician Choice

“If you could choose between two doctors, but only one used the following types of information technology in his or her practice, how much would this influence your choice of doctors?”

Base: All Adults (September 5 to 7, 2006)

		A Great Deal/To Some Extent (Net)	A Great Deal
An electronic medical record to capture medical information	%	54	18
Email to communicate directly with me or a family member	%	62	23

The Risks That Electronic Medical Records Will Compromise Privacy

While several aspects of health information technology and EMRs are appealing to many people, a substantial plurality (42% to 29%) of the public believes that the privacy risks of EMRs outweigh the potential benefits.

This response is surprising given that 64 percent of the public (Table 3) say, when asked, that they would like to have an EMR. This apparent contradiction can be explained by the fact that many people know nothing, and therefore presumably have no opinion, about EMRs. What we measured therefore was not public opinion so much as public reactions to ideas and benefits they had never previously thought about, but which they view in light of their general concerns about protection of the confidentiality and privacy of their sensitive medical information.

TABLE 5
Benefits and Risks of Electronic Medical Records

“Supporters of the new patient electronic record system say that strong privacy and data security regulations will be applied. Critics worry that these will not be applied or will not be sufficient. Overall, do you feel that the expected benefits to patients and society of this patient electronic medical record system outweigh potential risks to privacy, or do you feel that the privacy risks outweigh the expected benefits?”

Base: All Adults (September 7 to 13, 2006)

	%
Expected Benefits Outweigh Potential Risks	29
Privacy Risks Outweigh Expected Benefits	42
Not Sure	29

Steps Organizations Might Make When Transitioning to Electronic Medical Records

When presented with a list of four choices as to how they might be notified or consulted about the transition from paper records to EMRs, there is absolutely no consensus. About one in five adults (21%) say they want to be given the right not to have their medical records entered into the new electronic systems. Just over a quarter (27%) say that they want to be notified but would probably “be okay” with this. Twelve percent say they would want to be able to designate what does or does not get entered in their EMRs. Only 22 percent say that they would not need to be notified.

“What this indicates,” Dr. Westin noted, “is that over three quarters of the public – 78 percent – do not believe that organizations moving into an EMR system should treat this as just a clerical or administrative change. Rather, the public wants affected patients to be informed of how step would affect the handling of their health information and to be given various kinds of choices in the process.”

TABLE 6
Desire For Personal Involvement When Transitioning to Electronic Medical Records

“How would you like to be involved when organization providing you with health care records transition from mostly paper records to a complete electronic health record system? Please select one answer that best represents your view.

Base: All Adults (September 7 to 13, 2006)

	%
I don't need to be notified of the change since I don't think it will affect my relationship with my doctors and how they handle my information	22
I might be okay with this but I would want to be notified of this change and have the effect of the handling of my personal medical explained to me	27
I might be okay with this but I would want to be able to designate which parts of my medical records were entered or not entered into the electronic health record system	12
I would want to be given the right not to have any of my medical records entered into the new electronic record system	21
Other	1
Not sure	17

Lessons From HIPAA

Replies to two other questions, asked in the 2005 survey, suggest that the HIPAA rules – which many people in the health care system regard as unnecessarily burdensome – have been somewhat successful in retaining public confidence and reassuring patients that their medical privacy is being protected.

Two thirds of the public (67%) remember receiving HIPAA notices from their providers or insurers. A majority of those who recall this said that the regulations and the privacy notices have increased their confidence either somewhat (44%) or a lot (23%).

This suggests that notification to patients of the transition to EMRs, explanations of their effects and communication of continued HIPAA privacy rights would help reassure the public that their privacy will not be put at risk by EMRs.

TABLE 7A
Impact of HIPAA on Public Confidence

“Since 2000, a Federal Health Privacy regulation (called the HIPAA Rule) has required all health care organizations to give patients a privacy notice explaining how the organization will collect and use the patient’s health information, how it will keep the information secure, how patients can get access to their own health records, correct any errors, and control most disclosures of their information to people outside the health care system, have you ever received one of these HIPAA health privacy notices?”

Base: All Adults (February 2005)

	%
Yes (Received HIPAA Notice)	67
No	32
Not Sure	1

TABLE 7B

“Based on your experiences and what you may have heard, how much has this federal privacy regulation and the Privacy Notices affected your confidence that your personal medical information is being handled today in what you feel is a proper way? Has it increased your confidence?”

Base: Have Received HIPAA Privacy Notices (February 2005)

	%
A Great Deal	23
Somewhat	44
Not Very Much	13
Not Sure	18
Not Sure At All	1

Methodology

This Harris Poll® conducted three different surveys each of which contained some relevant questions on EMRs in 2006 and 2005. Two of these surveys (September 7 to 13, 2006 and February 8 to 13, 2005) were conducted with Dr. Alan F. Westin, Professor of Public Law & Government Emeritus at Columbia University and one of the world's leading authorities on privacy issues, as they affect business and government. The third survey (September 5 to 7, 2006) was conducted with The Wall Street Journal Online.

The surveys were field September 7 to 13, 2006 (among a national online sample of 2,747 adults), September 5 to 7, 2006 (among a national online sample of 2,624 adults) and February 8 to 13, 2005 (among a national sample of 1,012 adults.)

Figures for age, sex, race, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. For the online surveys propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

All surveys are subject to several sources of error. These include: sampling error (because only a sample of a population is interviewed); measurement error due to question wording and/or question order, deliberately or unintentionally inaccurate responses, nonresponse (including refusals), interviewer effects (when live interviewers are used) and weighting.

With one exception (sampling error) the magnitude of the errors that result cannot be estimated. There is, therefore, no way to calculate a finite "margin of error" for any survey and the use of these words should be avoided.

With pure probability samples, with 100 percent response rates, it is possible to calculate the probability that the sampling error (but not other sources of error) is not greater than some number. With pure probability samples of 2,747 or 2,624 adults' one could say with a ninety-five percent probability that the overall results have a sampling error of +/- two percentage points. However that does not take other sources of error into account. The online surveys are not based on a probability sample and therefore no theoretical sampling error can be calculated. The theoretical sampling error of the telephone survey of 1,012 adults is +/- three percentage points.

These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.

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