

Devices & technology

Two Birds with One Stone: High-Tech Solution Makes Records More Accessible, Reduces Paperwork

By Jennifer Larson, NurseZone feature writer

Could it be that one solution to the paperwork problem for nurses might be the side benefit of a solution to a completely different problem?

Perhaps. Dr. Don Miller has created a system to give medical staff in doctor's offices and hospitals better access to patient records, but his eNatal system may also reduce the amount of paperwork that nurses must deal with.

"It's a very nice side effect," Miller said.

And excess paperwork is a very real concern for most nurses. The American Hospital Association notes that paperwork adds at least 30 extra minutes to every hour of patient care provided in a typical situation.

eNatal was Miller's solution to a problem that he encountered while working as an obstetrician.

A pregnant patient would have a paper chart in her OB's office. An OB record is kept separately from any other patient record so that the obstetrician can easily reach the record. However, if the patient visited the hospital during her pregnancy, then a hospital staff member would have to retrieve a copy of her chart from the doctor's office. A nurse or clerk must call the doctor's office to request a copy of the chart, and a clerk or a nurse at the patient's OB's office would have to find the chart, photocopy the pages, and fax or deliver the record to the hospital.

If the patient arrives at the hospital in the middle of the night, it may become even more difficult to find someone in the doctor's office to retrieve her chart.

Miller was primarily concerned that it was difficult for the necessary medical staff to access the patient's record—and that the record might not be as current as it should be, especially if it's the copy left in the hospital.

So he devised a system that would allow obstetricians to put their patients' charts on the Internet. He runs a service that allows obstetrician offices and hospital units to subscribe to the basic service for \$17.50 per patient.

The labor and delivery nursing staff or hospital obstetrician can then access the same chart on the Internet in real time, rather than waiting for the paper copy to arrive. All they need is a subscription to eNatal and an Internet connection on a computer.

This can alleviate not only the volumes of paperwork that get passed back and forth between hospitals and OB offices but the labor needed to facilitate the process.

"We're talking about a lot of extra work thrown in there so you can provide the care that everybody expect you to provide in the first place," Miller said. "We're talking about time spent doing something else [other than] what they need to do."

Miller's wife is a nurse, and she, like many other nurses, dislike the fact that paperwork takes her away from the bedside, he said. The traditional process of dealing with OB records not only takes nurses away from their patients, but it creates a huge volume of paper that the hospital must deal with.

"So now we've got these reams of copies, copies of copies of every patient who's expected to deliver at the hospital, and they have to be filed somewhere," Miller said.

eNatal is set up to be compliant with privacy and security regulations spelled out by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996.

The security function of eNatal allows each subscribing group to decide who has privileges to view patient records; each party is then issued a username and password. That function can also make sure that only the necessary parties are granted access to certain patient information, Miller added.

It also eradicates the possibility that a paper record copy would sit in a fax machine tray, where it could be picked up and read by almost anyone in the area.

"You have tighter control of who sees what," he said, noting that this is an important HIPAA issue.

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