Doctors' use of E-records more than doubles

May 20 2014, by Steven Reinberg, Healthday Reporter

Government programs to defray costs help physicians install these electronic systems, report says.

(HealthDay)—Almost 80 percent of doctors in the United States have switched from paper to electronic health records, new government statistics show.

By 2012, almost 72 percent of physicians had made the change, compared to just under 35 percent in 2007, according to the report from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Since then, the number of doctors using electronic health records has increased even more, added lead researcher Esther Hing, a statistician at CDC's U.S. National Center for Health Statistics.

"In 2013, 78 percent of physicians were using electronic health record systems," Hing said. "We are reaching nearly all the doctors."

Hing noted that the progress is largely the result of the federal government's financial incentives to help doctors change to electronic recordkeeping.

"These incentives have had a large part in the increased adoption of these systems," Hing said.

However, many doctors (about 40 percent) aren't using the full capabilities of their system, Hing noted. Once the system is installed, there is a steep learning curve before doctors and other staff are able to use it efficiently, she said.

Basic systems keep track of patient data, prescriptions and lab test results, Hing explained. More advanced features can graph patient tests to note trends and keep track of changes in the patients' health over time.

Hing noted that the real goal of these systems is to improve patient care. However, whether or not they do is still unknown.

"We are still evaluating the results. We think it improves the care provided to a patient. Anecdotally, in certain settings, it's been demonstrated that these systems have improved health by improving coordination of care, reducing medication errors and overuse of tests," Hing added.

Of the doctors who turned to electronic health records by 2012, 39.6 percent used a basic system, up from 11.8 percent in 2007, the researchers found. And 23.5 percent had a fully functional system, up from 3.8 percent in 2007, according to the findings published May 20 in the CDC's *National Health Statistics Reports*.

Hing also noted that in 2007 larger practices (11 doctors or more) were more likely to have an electronic record system (just over 74 percent)

than smaller practices (about 21 percent), but by 2012 that gap had narrowed.

As more doctors adopted electronic record systems, however, the gap between those who used a basic system and those who took advantage of all the features of their system widened from an estimated 10 percent in 2007 to about 31 percent in 2012, Hing said.

One expert applauded the increased use of electronic health records.

"Medicine is entering the 21st century at long last," said Dr. David Blumenthal, president of the Commonwealth Fund. "Despite the fact that it's hard for many individuals—especially those in solo practice, especially older physicians and nurses—despite the fact that it's hard for them and the systems aren't perfect, we are on the way toward the information age in medicine. We are finally getting there."

Blumenthal added, "I have absolutely no question that there will be a payoff in terms of patient care."

Doctors aren't the only ones turning to electronic health records. A report released by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation last July found that the number of hospitals with a basic electronic health records system tripled from 2010 to 2012, with more than four of every 10 hospitals equipped with the new health information technology.

More information: Visit HealthIT.gov for more on electronic health records.

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