

Reduced emergency room visits for elderly patients attributed to 'virtual' health care team approach

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Elderly patients suffering from chronic illnesses who receive 'virtual' care from a team of medical experts linked together via phone, fax and e-mail, make fewer emergency visits than patients who do not receive this kind of coordinated team care approach according to a new study by Rush University Medical Center. The study will be presented at the American Geriatrics Society's Annual Scientific Meeting on Friday, May 2.

Researchers studied a pilot project designed at Rush called, "Virtual Integrated Practice (VIP)," that links physician practices to teams of pharmacists, social workers and dieticians via phone, fax and e-mail so they could coordinate care for patients. This new approach is designed to develop effective team building and ongoing collaboration among health care providers who do not work together in practice in the same locations or even the same organizations.

Researchers followed higher risk diabetic patients over the course of two years and found that patients in the VIP program made fewer trips to the ER than those not in the program. Patients getting VIP care also reported better understanding of how to use their medications than those getting standard care. In addition, physicians who were part of virtual teams reported that they were better informed of how their patients were doing between visits than those that were not part of virtual teams.

“Doctors usually communicate through inefficient systems that haven’t changed much in the past three decades. They still pass notes back and forth in the form of prescriptions, signed orders, and mailed progress reports,” said principal investigator Dr. Steven K. Rothschild, co-director of the section of community and social medicine in the department of preventative medicine at Rush. “The VIP study shows the feasibility of interdisciplinary virtual teams as a practical solution to many challenges seen in primary care geriatric care practices,” said Rothschild.

Experts in treating the elderly consider coordinated, interdisciplinary team health care optimal for older adults, who tend to have multiple chronic health problems. Coordinated team care is a key element for the “Medical Home” patient-centered care approach to care. While older adults with multiple chronic illnesses can benefit from coordinated care provided by physicians as well as nurses, pharmacists and other health care providers, 60 percent of primary care physician practices in the U.S. are small and unlikely to have the resources to create and maintain interdisciplinary care teams.

“We have proven results that indicate that the VIP model is a replicable roadmap and can easily be adopted by solo and small group practices that care for frail elders,” said Rothschild.

Source: Rush University

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