

E-records linked to fewer malpractice claims

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Harvard study shows dramatic dip after paper files are replaced, but exact connection isn't clear.

(HealthDay News) -- Malpractice claims dipped dramatically among Massachusetts physicians after they began using electronic medical records, according to new research, although it's not clear whether the record-keeping was connected to the decline in claims.

Despite its limitations, however, the research provides more evidence that [electronic health records](#) "improve quality and safety and, as a result, prevent [adverse events](#) and reduce the risk of malpractice claims," said study co-author Dr. Steven Simon, an associate professor with Harvard Medical School and an internist with VA Boston [Healthcare System](#).

[Electronic medical records](#) allow physicians to use computers to track patients instead of relying on paper files. Supporters of [electronic records](#) say they cut down on errors by making it easier for doctors to spot problems such as medication conflicts and allergies. They can also

make it easier for doctors to communicate with patients and with other physicians.

The medical world hasn't quickly embraced electronic records, in part because of the cost of switching from paper. Email communications, in particular, appear rare: In 2010, a HealthDay/Harris Interactive poll found that fewer than 1 in 10 adults used email to communicate with their physician.

And some physicians are skeptical of electronic health records, saying they could lead to "unintended consequences" that create new kinds of errors and problems for patients, Simon said.

In the new study, researchers tracked malpractice cases for 275 physicians who were surveyed in 2005 and 2007. Of those, 33 were targeted by malpractice claims. Forty-nine claims related to alleged medical malpractice that took place before the physicians adopted electronic health records, and two occurred after.

The researchers estimate that [medical malpractice claims](#) were about 84 percent less likely after electronic medical records were put into place.

The study says factors other than electronic health records could account for the difference in claims. Physicians who used the records, for example, could be "early adopters" whose style of medicine was less likely to spawn malpractice claims. Also, Massachusetts made major changes to the state's health care system in 2006.

And, the researchers pointed out in their letter published in the June 25 online edition of *Archives of Internal Medicine*, the study was limited to only those doctors in Massachusetts who were affiliated with Harvard Medical School.

Nevertheless, Tom Baker, a professor of law and health sciences at University of Pennsylvania Law School, said the study makes sense and "alleviates concerns that the use of electronic health records could lead to increased medical malpractice risk."

Some observers have feared that the ease of reviewing [electronic health records](#) would make it easier to find errors, he added.

"This research suggests that, rather than increasing medical malpractice risk, adopting electronic [health records](#) reduces that risk," he said.

More information: For more on [health records](#), try the U.S. National Library of Medicine.

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