



Leaders: EMRs Aren't the Answer to Safety Issues

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Poor communication, such as exchanging important clinical information about patients during shift changes, is the largest barrier to achieving patient safety goals, healthcare leaders say. And electronic medical records systems? Well, despite the fact that they're an effective tool to improve datasharing and, in turn, quality, healthcare leaders aren't exactly raving about how much they're helping.

Numbers from the most recent HealthLeaders Media Intelligence Report, *The Drive to Patient Safety*, suggests leaders are underestimating—or discounting altogether—just how much electronic data can improve communications.

When asked to describe the patient safety benefit that electronic medical records have provided their healthcare organizations, 31% of respondents said that IT has been an integral part of patient safety and that their organization is seeing gains because of it.

But only slightly fewer respondents (25%) described patient safety gains from IT as "episodic." Another 16% were even more down on EMRs—saying they have not seen the patient safety gains they hoped to gain from their IT platform.

The rest couldn't say one way or the other because they don't yet have an EMR. But here's another twist to think about. Although 28% of respondents said they don't have an EMR, only 10% of respondents identified that lack of electronic medical records as their biggest stumbling block to adopting a strong patient safety program.

In other words, those who don't yet have an EMR don't see that as such a big deal when it comes to patient safety.

So what are the biggest barriers to better patient safety? Well, not surprisingly a good chunk cited culture (16%) and another chunk put it down to lack of personnel resources (16%). Others blamed lack of physician leadership (11%) or lack of executive leadership commitment (5%).

But the problem most frequently cited as the biggest stumbling block to better patient safety? Poor communication.

Take a moment to soak in just how bad that communication is: We asked respondents "How often is important patient care information lost during shift changes?" A whopping 69% answered always (56%), often (12%), or sometimes (1%). Only 27% said it rarely happens and only 5% said it never happens.

Here's another one: We asked "How often do things fall through the cracks regarding patient safety when transferring patients from one unit to another?" Again, "sometimes" was the clear winner at 56%.



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Do you see the disconnect, here? Electronic data is a solution to what leaders say is their biggest problem. Electronic data doesn't hitch a ride home in the back of a nurse's mind at the end of his or her shift. Electronic data doesn't get lost when it's mixed in with the take-out menu pile and it doesn't get ruined when someone spills coffee on it.

In short, electronic data doesn't "fall through the cracks" unless you willfully refuse to look at and use it.

This is not to discount human interaction and communication—healthcare is, after all, a very human-centric business. Report advisor James Eastham, president and CEO of Valley Baptist Health System in Harlingen, TX, notes that many safety issues could be avoided or minimized with an extra minute or so of one-on-one communications.

But as the survey suggests, communication issues are a "challenge for healthcare," says the lead advisor on the report, COO of Bassett Healthcare Network COO Bertine McKenna. "There are thousands of people who are involved in patient care. Ensuring that we communicate all the key things during handoffs—shift to shift, inpatient to radiology for a test, or floor to floor, to cath lab and back—is a challenge."

Electronic data can improve communication—and, as McKenna puts it, communication and quality go hand-in-hand. "The electronic medical record solutions will help us with this and is an investment in patient care and safety," she says.

According to this survey, at least, there are way too many healthcare leaders out there who don't seem to get that.

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