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Leverage clinical decision support

By Barry Chaiken MD

Americans receive only slightly more than half of the screening, diagnostic, treatment, and follow-up care recommended by experts. In essence, even though healthcare professionals know the proper way to manage patients, these evidence-based rules are mostly not followed. At the same time, the consumer movement is growing and more citizens are becoming responsible for the active Internet-enabled clinical and financial management of their own care.

Over the past decade, effective diagnostic clinical decision support tools have been developed to assist physicians in the diagnosis and treatment of disease. In looking at the diagnostic decision support tools on the market, physicians and hospital executives should seek tools that utilize images and specific treatment guidelines. As a complement to physicians' decision support tools, there are a few good Internet-based consumer sites that assist healthcare consumers in understanding their illness through related images and patient care information.

Unlike atlases or other online medical references, effective diagnostic clinical decision support tools are patient specific based on the actual patient's symptoms. This generates a visual differential diagnosis that can immediately be utilized by the physician. In addition, clinical decision support tools provide up-to-date treatment protocols reflecting the best-available knowledge. For patients working with physicians, reviewing images and corresponding content helps the patients gain confidence in the diagnosis and the prescribed treatment.

Patients who use a complementary online patient tool obtain consumer friendly "decision support," which assists them in directing care. These support tools help patients decide whether it is necessary to visit a physician sooner in a disease lifecycle, when treatment can be more effective and less expensive, rather than later when the disease may be more difficult to treat. For patients who are uninsured or underinsured, more accurately identified visual information prompts the need to see the physician or alternatively avoid unnecessary office visits or treatments.

Empowering consumers with clinical knowledge assists in the delivery of safer, more efficient care that offers higher-quality outcomes. Empowering physicians with clinical decision support is an early "win" for the physician just now deploying clinic room computers.

This helps to better manage available patient information and provides more accurate diagnoses and more effective treatments. Only by working together to embrace health care IT with embedded clinical decision support can consumers and physicians positively impact health care reform in their effort to achieve better outcomes, improve access, and deliver affordable and safe care.

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