THE LAST WORD

The Hope and the Hype of Health IT

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Diagnosing illness and treating patients: There’s just not an app for that.

There’s just not an app for that. Electronic health records (EHRs) are probably the single most talked about piece of health information technology (HIT) today. EHRs have been strongly supported by various medical societies, including the AAFP, and by leading figures of both major political parties. The federal government has even earmarked billions of dollars to incentivize meaningful use of EHRs and to encourage widespread adoption. (Full disclosure: I implemented an EHR in my practice almost nine years ago.)

Although the hope is that EHRs will improve quality and reduce costs, current studies do not demonstrate this. On the issue of quality, consider these findings recently summarized in the Wall Street Journal:

• In a systematic review of the effects of handheld EHRs on clinical care, researchers found that incorrect or redundant diagnoses occurred more often when physicians used electronic records than when they used paper records (48 instances versus 7 instances). They concluded, “This highlights another area where informatics interventions are being implemented widely without rigorous evaluation.”

• In a study of the influence of EHRs on adherence to evidence-based guidelines for treatment of heart failure among more than 15,000 outpatients, use of EHRs was associated with improvement in the delivery of quality care on just one of seven care measures.

• In a systematic review of 86 published papers on the use of EHRs in primary care, researchers found that “quality of care, patient safety and provider/patient relations were not, positively or negatively, affected by systems implementation.”

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About the Author
Dr. Newbell is a family physician in private practice in Hazel Green, Ala. Author disclosure: nothing to disclose.