Do Electronic Health Records Distract Doctors?

Welcome back from the Thanksgiving holiday. We hope the information we provided in last week's blog helped you win the dinner table debate over electronic health records (EHRs). Now, we don't want you to reignite any disputes, but a study released in the Journal of the American Medical Association this week offers an interesting new angle to the EHR topic—computer use and its impact on client communication.



Despite the obvious efficiencies created by EHRs, there may be some interpersonal drawbacks. Dr. Neda Ratanawongsa of the University of California San Francisco, who led the study, found that "high computer use by clinicians in safety-net clinics was associated with lower patient satisfaction and observable communication differences." As a company dedicated to developing health IT systems that hopefully lead to better health better care, the study got our attention.

The researchers collected data from an affiliated public hospital where they videotaped hospital visits and rated the doctor's computer use (e.g., typing and/or reading) and their levels of non-verbal communication (e.g., eye contact and/or non-interactive pauses). Patients were then interviewed and asked to rate the quality of care from poor to excellent. It turns out that more than 80 percent of encounters where computer usage was low rated their experience as "excellent" as compared to only about 50 percent for those where computer usage was high. It's not surprising then that doctors with more screen time made less eye contact and reportedly engaged in more negative rapport.

Although this aspect of the EHR debate is less talked about, some doctors are keeping up with their bedside manner by hiring medical scribes. These assistants attend patient visits and enter data in real-time, so doctors can focus on the patient.

Have you experienced a decrease in communication with your doctor due to the use of computers or technology? What other ideas do you have for doctors so they can attend to both their patients and important EHR information? Let us know by joining the conversation on Twitter. Find us @CNSICorp