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E-Medicine in the Physician's Office

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SUMMARY

E-medicine encompasses services including telephone, Internet, telemedicine, and electronic medical records. Each has unique potential to enhance the doctor–patient relationship and to increase physician liability. This chapter discusses each modality in detail. Detailed guidelines for online communication are presented.

Key Words: E-medicine; e-mail; risk reduction; telephone; online medical communication; Internet; guidelines for online communications; electronic medicine.

INTRODUCTION

E-medicine, or electronic medicine, refers to the use of electronic communication and information technology by physicians in the care of patients. Therefore, e-medicine encompasses various services including telephone, Internet, telemedicine, and electronic medical records. Each of these services has the unique potential to enhance the patient–physician relationship. As with all services that impact patient care, each also has the potential to increase physician liability.

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At the highest level, all forms of e-medicine share certain characteristics, as follow:

- Physicians are responsible for the services they provide for their patients.
- The appropriateness of the service and the potential value of the service will vary with specific patients.
- Appropriate patient expectations should be set.
- Standards of care or service, existing or evolving, should be followed to protect the interests of physicians and patients and to limit liability.
- Practical, financial, and technical considerations that impact the appropriate use of the service exist.
- Security and privacy considerations must be determined
- Record keeping should be an essential part of the service and an essential component of limiting physician liability.

The application of these principles varies with the specific service.

TELEPHONE-BASED CARE

The use of the telephone in the treatment of patients is neither new nor controversial. However, it does represent a legitimate form of patient care that has clear benefits as well as clear liabilities. When the telephone first emerged as a popular form of communication in the early 20th century, it was looked on with concern by many in the medical establishment. Warnings were given to doctors that the role of the telephone should not replace a face-to-face office visit and that telephone-based care could lead to suboptimal clinical outcomes and liability. Those concerns continue to be an issue.

Although the use of the telephone has become an essential component of medical care, particularly in the outpatient setting, it has largely been relegated to an administrative tool for setting appointments, refilling prescriptions, billing, and related administrative requests and questions. Physicians generally are not reimbursed for providing telephone-based care and, as the demands of physicians have increased with the advent of managed care, patient frustrations related to poor telephone access to their doctor has increased. Numerous national studies, including a national survey of patients done by Harris Polls, confirm growing patient frustration in their inability to communicate with their physicians via the telephone.

Telephone: Value and Appropriateness of the Service

It is hard to imagine running a physician's office without a telephone. Yet the use of the telephone varies widely among physicians, even