Keeping your own health records can improve the quality of your care

by Diana Rossetti

Putting your health completely in the hands of others simply is not a good idea, say some doctors.

Family medicine specialists Keith Werstler and Christopher Stetler say that patients are wise to participate in their health care by maintaining up-to-date records of their own. That means working in partnership with your primary care provider as well as keeping important health history readily accessible in case of emergency.

"I speak with a lot of my patients about this very thing," said Dr. Christopher Stetler who is affiliated with Mercy Medical Center in Canton, Ohio.

KEEP GOOD RECORDS - Keep your own medical records, experts say. It could improve the quality of health care you receive. CNS Photo Illustration by Eri Hashimoto.

"I do encourage them to maintain personal health records because, a lot of times, this will empower them as far as their medical care is concerned. Knowing what's been done and what they are taking is important. It's a process in improving the quality of care they're getting and it also allows better coordination of care between the patient and physician and other providers they may be seeing."

IF YOU'RE SEEING OTHERS

Without a complete and accurate medical picture of their patient, doctors can neither treat nor prescribe with full confidence. It is incumbent upon a patient seeing multiple physicians to divulge complete medical records to each.

Stetler's experiences with patients in a hospital emergency room mirrors those of many physicians.

"If they (ER personnel) don't know what medical problems this patient may have, they may decide to run a bunch of tests. If they had their own medical records, they could show the ER staff they just had that blood test done yesterday or that it should be in the hospital computer along with X-rays or a stress test done two weeks ago," he pointed out.

Dr. Keith Werstler of Aultman Family Medicine stresses similar cautions. "It's especially wise for you to always have a medication list somewhere that's accessible. In your wallet or in your purse. If you can't communicate, emergency workers know to look there to find out who you are and possibly some medical information," he explained. "If you're out and you break your hip, even though you're awake and can communicate, a lot of people don't remember what medicine they're on. They'll say a pink one or a red one. Even if you carry your physician's name with you and you're not able to communicate, a lot of times, they can contact us and we can fax the information to the hospital."

CONSIDER MEDIC ALERT

Werstler strongly recommends wearing a medic alert bracelet or necklace, similar to the ones worn by diabetics, patients on blood-thinning medication and those with implantable cardiac defibrillators.

"If emergency surgery is required, it is very important to know about the defibrillators when surgeons are using metal instruments," he said. Patients with seizure disorders, too, can leave emergency medical providers in the dark if they are not wearing a medic alert bracelet.

"You might have a seizure that no one witnesses. Now someone sees you collapsed and you're really groggy and sleepy after a seizure. They need to know why you're in that condition to give you the proper treatment," Werstler added. When patients opt to go to the emergency room, both doctors strongly urge them to toss all their medications, herbs, supplements and vitamins in a bag and take it with them.

"It only takes a minute but then they can sort things out in the ER.

Sometimes medications are expired or we learn they're not taking one and haven't refilled another," Werstler remarked. "Sometimes, we're amazed that they're taking something we didn't know about."

While acknowledging that many older patients do not have personal computers, Stetler suggests that perhaps a family member could print out their health history, tests, procedures and medications in spreadsheet form to keep at the ready. "In today's world, I think the patient needs to take a more active role in their own health care. And we really want them to focus as we do on preventive health care."

HOW KEEPING YOUR OWN RECORDS CAN HELP

- Allows you to discuss your health knowledgeably with healthcare providers

- Provides information to new caregivers

- Gives you easy access while traveling

- You have information when your doctor's office is closed

- Records your progress toward a specific health-related goal

- Provides reference information for physician instructions, prescriptions, allergies, medications, insurance claims and more

- Tracks appointments, vaccinations and other wellness services

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