How EHRs Can Help Prevent Opioid Addiction

By Kayla Matthews

If used properly, EHRs can help prevent the opioid epidemic from continuing to grow by managing prescription documents.

**Source:** Physicians Practice

Electronic Health Records (EHR), are a useful tool to help doctors and nurses provide comprehensive care to their patients. These records enable patient records to be updated and tracked from a variety of locations. They can also send electronic prescriptions from hospitals and other medical offices to the patient's pharmacy.

EHR may also be a weapon against over-prescribing certain medications. With the growing opioid epidemic spreading across the country, medical professionals and law enforcement are looking for innovative ways to reduce the number of opioid addicts. How can EHRs help prevent the growing threat of addiction to controlled substances like opioids?

**Addiction Statistics**
Americans use more prescription opioids than any other country in the world. Roughly 80% of the planet's opioid supply is prescribed and used in the United States. In 2012 it was estimated that more than two million people in the U.S. suffered from a form of substance abuse disorder related directly to prescription opioids, and fatalities from heroin overdose were close to 30,000 annually. Another concern is that four out of five new heroin users started with an addition to prescription painkillers. This number has only grown in the intervening years, though the exact numbers are difficult to track because many people suffering from addiction don't seek help or treatment for their substance abuse.

**EHR Implantation**
Adopting new technology takes time, but the rates of EHR adoption are on the rise. As of January 2016, 59 percent of medical providers reported using an EHR system in their offices. The number is slightly lower than the year before, but that is mostly because the number of providers surveyed in 2016 was much higher than the previous year. This includes participating pharmacies as well.

**EHR Prescriptions**
Electronic prescriptions for controlled substances require extra checks and balances before a prescription can be processed. The prescriber has to be qualified to prescribe certain controlled substances, and those qualifications can be revoked. Utilizing electronic prescriptions also provides a digital paper trail that can be tracked. This is one of the most important tools to help prevent illegitimate opioid prescriptions from being processed. This paper trail helps discourage chronic "doctor shopping," the practice of changing doctors frequently to find someone who is willing to prescribe painkillers. Stricter regulations and detailed electronic records are the first steps toward countering the growing number of opioid addictions.

**EHRs and PDMPs**
While EHRs are a phenomenal tool, they are not enough to counter the number of opioid addictions. This is why many states have implemented prescription drug monitoring processes, or PDMPs. This close monitoring has reduced the number of opioid prescriptions in states where they have been implemented by nearly 41 percent. Changes in policy have affected the number of opioid prescriptions. Previously, people seeking an opioid prescription could visit a hospital to obtain a prescription for their painkiller of choice. States like Connecticut have recognized the dangers of such policies and have taken action to prevent how much and what kinds of opioid patients can be prescribed. Other states like West Virginia will make it more difficult for patients to be prescribed opiates by requiring all opioid prescriptions to be preauthorized by the state's Medicaid program. Patients being discharged from the emergency department are given no more than a few days' supply of a short-acting opioid, and any prescription for larger amounts of opioid painkillers require...
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the prescribing physician check with the states PDMP. By enabling both medical professionals and law enforcement officers to keep track of prescriptions of controlled substances, PDMPs have allowed public institutions to take the first steps in reducing the number of opioid addictions in the United States.

EHRs in the Future
Implementing the use of electronic health records universally throughout the medical community is only the beginning. EHRs allow the medical community to keep track of records and prescriptions as well as flag problems areas for opioid abuse. Once they have been universally implemented, these EHRs can also be used to predict trends including substance abuse statistics.

By adopting predictive analytics, or the application of machine learning algorithms to the data collected by these EHRs, the medical community could predict variables such as the kind of people who, based on their genetics, demographics or other information, might be susceptible to substance abuse.

Predictive analytics won't provide specific information that allows an individual to be identified, but they could provide risk factors that medical professionals can be on the lookout for.

EHRs are one of the most vital tools for providing accurate and efficient care for patients across the country. If used correctly, they could also be the most important weapons in our fight against opioid substance abuse.

Kayla Matthews is a health IT writer and blogger, who contributes to BioMed Central, VentureBeat, The Huffington Post and Kareo's Go Practice Blog. To read more posts from Kayla, follow her on her blog, Productivity Theory.

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