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Examining Provider Burden from the 21st Century Cures Act

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Family Medicine Clerkship Community Health Project, LCOM
South Burlington Family Practice, March-May 2021
Project Mentor: Dr. Katherine Mariani
What is the 21st Century Cures Act?

- Signed in December 2016, provides funding for various research initiatives
- Allocates funding to address the opioid addiction crisis
- Additionally has wide scope in requiring data sharing and accessibility from physician networks (1)

What are the potential drawbacks?

- This project focuses on the data accessibility portion of the bill
  - Requires patient health information to be made instantly available to patients in real-time
- Physician notes, which typically include medical jargon, now present a great challenge in balancing using concise, precise language while needing to cater to the layperson reading audience
- There is a need for a system to help educate patients on interpreting their important health information
Impacts on Public Health

- The Cures Act presents a need for balance between:
  - Patients’ right to access their health information & difficulties in interpreting medical reports
- Prior to the Cures Act, physicians and health care providers could expect 18.9 inquiries per 100 patients per month (2)
- The Cures Act could lead to a dramatic increase in these events, resulting in lost physician time, increasing rates of burnout, and decreased quality of work
- From a patient perspective, confusion in interpreting results may provoke unnecessary fear and uncertainty
What do patients think?

- Two patients at the South Burlington Family Medicine clinic were interviewed anonymously on their perspectives of the Cures Act:

- Patient H noted that though they are retired, they check their EMR portal regularly. They frequently make use of the messaging feature to ask questions directly to providers and worry that it will take longer to hear back if more patients have questions consecutively. They noted they have particular difficulty in interpreting imaging results.

- Patient A noted that they try to check their EMR portal prior to their appointments. They have not had many questions concerning their data in the past, but they are worried that they will have a hard time understanding “medical words” without needing to consult Google or calling into the office for clarification.
Our Intervention

- An 8-question survey was devised and distributed to various family medicine clinics in the greater Burlington area via email
  - The primary focus of this intervention was to assess the need for a patient-accessible resource that would guide them through interpreting their health data
- Any health care provider that has patient contact was eligible to participate, all answers were de-identified of any personal information
- A sample question is posted below:
  - “Which of the following categories of lab findings do you find patients have the most questions about?” (answers included topics like: CBC results, A1c levels, cardiac enzymes and electrolytes)
- Intervention goals included obtaining provider perspective on changes in their practice since initiation of the Cures Act in early 2021
Results

- 24 health care providers completed our survey, 83.3% were physicians
- 41.7% of respondents indicated that they have been receiving more phone calls since the enactment of the Cures Act
- Respondents indicated that the top 3 types of results patients had questions about were complete blood counts, electrolytes and imaging results
- 75% of respondents believe that a handout with tips that could help patients better interpret their lab results would be beneficial
- 50% of providers noted it currently takes them 24-48 hours to respond to patient message requests, a number that could rise from increased patient questions
- Nearly half of providers feel they have modified how they write notes since the enactment of the Cures Act
Determination of Effectiveness & Limitations

- By providing a community-based survey, effectiveness is determined based on successfully assessing the need for a resource patients could use to better understand their health data.
- We hope that more efficient data transfer and processing will have long-term positive health outcomes for the broader patient population, while minimizing physician and provider burden.
- This study was geographically limited to the Burlington, VT area and comprised a small sample size. Additionally, more data is needed to determine the impact of the Cures Act considering its short time-course.
Shaping a Brighter Future

- As patients continued to become more independent in accessing their own health information, we hope the medical community can find novel techniques to aid in their patients’ understanding.
- This project serves as an initial gauge on the need for improvements in this field.
- We believe setting a strong framework now will ensure a smooth transition as more patients begin to access their complete health information profile electronically.
References

Interview Participants

- With permission from Dr. Amanda Kolb, patients were informed their answers will remain anonymous and only their first initials will be made publicly available. Full interview transcripts are available on request.