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Functional Impairment and Internet Use Among Older Adults: Implications for Meaningful Use of Patient Portals

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Discussion | In a decade with increasing emphasis and accountability for glycemic control and cardiovascular risk management among patients with diabetes, we found that patients with diabetes have experienced a disproportionate reduction in in-hospital mortality over time and a complete reversal in risk of mortality relative to patients without diabetes. This interesting trend warrants additional study to elucidate its origins. Potential explanations include coincident improvements in inpatient glycemic control, improvements in outpatient glycemic control, improved nonglycemic cardiovascular risk management among patients with diabetes, and/or advances in therapies for diseases that disproportionately affect patients with diabetes.

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Functional Impairment and Internet Use Among Older Adults: Implications for Meaningful Use of Patient Portals

Medicare is currently dispensing $30 billion in incentives to health care facilities that adopt the use of electronic medical records (EMRs). In 2014, incentives for “meaningful use” of EMRs will require online access by patients, and reimbursement penalties of up to 5% for nonadoption will begin in 2015.1 Broader use of online patient portals to EMRs is intended to improve care coordination; yet the impact of common problems in Medicare-eligible patients, such as chronic illness or functional impairment, on Internet use is unknown.

Methods | This study was approved by the institutional review board for the University of California, San Francisco. We used the Health and Retirement Study (http://hrsonline.isr.umich.edu), a nationally representative sample of community-dwelling seniors (limited to Medicare-eligible individuals aged ≥65 years, excluding the 3%-6% of all Medicare patients who live in nursing homes), for cross-sectional analysis of Internet use at 2 time points, 2002 and 2010 (Table). Information regarding informed consent is available at the Health and Retirement Study website. We performed descriptive statistics (χ2 or t test) and multivariable regression analysis (modified Poisson) to characterize features of Internet use at each time point.

Results | Overall rates of Internet use doubled from 2002 through 2010 (from 21% to 42%); however, changes in use differed by demographic and health characteristics. Overall, groups with the lowest rates showed the largest relative increases from 2002 through 2010: those with less than a high school education (from 4% to 9%), nonwhite race (from 7% to 21%), functional impairment (from 10% to 23%), poor or fair self-rated health (from 11% to 25%), age 75 years or older (from 12% to 27%), underprivileged status (from 12% to 29%), and any chronic condition (from 19% to 40%) (Table).
In multivariable regression analysis adjusted for demographic characteristics and socioeconomic status, those older than 75 years or with functional impairments were less likely to use the Internet than all other groups in both 2002 and 2010. Comparing these adjusted ratios in the 2002 to 2010 period, there were significant changes in 3 low-use groups: those aged 75 years or older, nonwhites, and those with poor or fair self-rated health. There was no significant change, however, for those with functional impairment (Figure). 

Discussion | Internet use has increased in Medicare-eligible patients from 2002 through 2010 but remains low for the frailest seniors. Our results suggest that functional impairment is more predictive of Internet nonuse than chronic illness, poor self-rated health, or age, which has important implications for patient portal use. Whereas prior studies of the “digital divide” in health care have highlighted differences in demographic characteristics and socioeconomic status, our study demonstrates the additional impact of functional limitations that are prevalent in the Medicare population. If these trends from the early years of EMR use persist into the current era of rapid implementation, the frailest and most vulnerable patients may be at risk for increasingly disengaged and uncoordinated care as more aspects of health care move online.

Thus, strategies to reduce the digital divide in Medicare patients will also need to address functional limitations. Existing software can read web pages out loud for visually impaired individuals, and voice recognition software may make Internet use easier for those who cannot easily manipulate a mouse or keyboard. Furthermore, emerging mobile technologies such as touchscreens, smartphones, and motion sensors may enable a wide range of body gestures to further expand the ways that people can interact with EMRs via the Internet. Although more evidence is needed to validate outcomes for these approaches, it is clear that patient portals will require greater agility to adapt to patient needs. Beyond adaptive changes in the technology per se, more training is needed for frail seniors and their caregivers to use portals effectively to engage in care. Indeed, caregivers (often younger and not functionally impaired) are likely important but overlooked targets for expanding portal use and improving care coordination for frail seniors. Without such adaptations, frail seniors who might otherwise benefit the most from portals may be the least likely to engage.
Meaningful use of EMRs will soon require patient portal use by Medicare patients, and more seniors are going online now than ever; however, our findings highlight the need for health care providers to address functional barriers to Internet use and for future research to target digital health interventions to the specific needs of the frailest patients in this aging population.

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The Effect of a Physician Partner Program on Physician Efficiency and Patient Satisfaction

Despite the advantages of electronic health records, concerns have been raised about the amount of computer time spent documenting care and its adverse effects on the physician-patient relationship. Using scribes to reduce physician documentation time has resulted in improved satisfaction among urologists and increased productivity among emergency department physicians and cardiologists. Although scribes have been used in primary care, their effects have received little formal evaluation.

We created a new position, a Physician Partner (P2), to facilitate patient care during the office visit and tested this in 2 practices at an academic medical center to determine its effect on physician efficiency and patient satisfaction.

Methods | Two P2s, one with a bachelor’s degree and the other a licensed vocational nurse, performed scribing and other administrative functions for 3 geriatricians (D.B.R., B.K.K., and 1 other) and 2 general internists (E.G. and 1 other) in a 2:1 ratio (Figure). During the study, the practices used an electronic health record (cView; Orion Health) that relied primarily on scanned paper outpatient notes.