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Managing Health Online: Developing a Personal Health Record

by Shawn Davis, Ph.D.

Introduction

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of one’s life is their personal health. Unfortunately, this is also one of the facets wherein the individual feels the least control. During the past several years, however, there has been a significant push by the American public to become a more active agent in their healthcare. Advancements in the Internet, web technologies and communications, and other electronic tools are allowing individuals to become increasingly informed consumers of health information and more actively engaged in their health care than was previously possible. One such tool that has shown great promise in returning to the individual the management of one's health is the online personal health record.

What is a Personal Health Record?

The personal health record (PHR) is a tool for collecting, organizing, and sharing important and relevant health information for yourself or for someone within your care [1]. It is through use of PHR that an individual is positioned to make better health decisions by allowing them easy and immediate access to their health information for their personal use and for effective communication of this information with others concerned with their healthcare [2]. Do note that a PHR is created and maintained by the individual and is different from the electronic health records that are maintained by one's health care provider [3].

In 2004, President Bush made the commitment that all citizens within the United States would have access to their electronic medical records within 10 years. This pledge reflects the belief among many that there is great potential of health information technology to significantly improve
an individual's health and health care. It is expected that the personal health record will serve as an adjunct to established medical record keeping and that it will serve as a lifelong resource useful for the individual as they make health care decisions [4].

**What Information is Contained in a PHR?**

Of course, the actual content of your personal health record will depend greatly upon the health care that you have personally received. There are, however, documents that are common to most personal health records, including [5]:

- An identification document including contact information and relevant insurance information.
- Documents describing your individual and family history including any major illnesses, surgeries (including operative reports and discharge summaries), health habits, and current and past medications (including any allergies to medicines that might exist).
- A record detailing any physical examinations and the results of these examinations.
- Documentation of any medical tests and laboratory reports including x-rays, medical scans, ultrasounds, mammograms, cholesterol tests, blood tests, etc.
- Reports of consultations with health care professionals and any subsequent recommendations (including progress notes when applicable).
- A complete record of all immunizations received.
• Documents detailing any authorizations and consent for hospital admission, medical treatment, and the release of medical information.

How is a Personal Health Record Useful?

By maintaining the information contained within one's personal health record in a unified location, an individual is provided convenient access to their health history, both from home and when traveling. The information contained within the record is easily updated and can contain information beyond that of the formal health records maintained by one's physician including dietary and exercise information, goals for present and future behavior, and any herbal or other non-prescription medications that one might be taking.

Fundamentally, by maintaining a personal health record an individual can play a more active role in their healthcare [6]. With a comprehensive PHR, the individual can more knowledgably discuss pertinent health information and concerns with their healthcare provider. In situations when one must seek out a new healthcare provider, the PHR allows the individual to provide accurate and complete information to the new provider. A PHR allows the individual to access their health information at anytime; they are no longer bound by the operating hours of their healthcare provider. Furthermore, a detailed PHR provides a useful source of information when dealing with health insurance companies and allows for a convenient method of tracking developing health care concerns.

How Do You Create a Personal Health Record?

The first step toward the creation of a personal health record is requesting a copy of your health records from your healthcare provider. For a more complete recording of your health information, this should include requesting information from any specialists that you might have seen as well as from your general practitioner. It might be possible for
you to obtain these records in an electronic format [7]. Next, determine which mechanism you will utilize to maintain your information. This mechanism can be as simple as a file folder or more interactive as is found in most online maintenance systems (see section on Online Maintenance of a Personal Health Record below). The system that you will utilize will, no doubt, reflect the complexity of your health information and the frequency that this information must be updated. Online systems are particularly useful for individuals who have a considerable amount of information to maintain and for those individuals who have particular need to make this available to others who are geographically separated.

It is quite possible that you will not be able to gather all of the information that you will ultimately include in your PHR immediately as much of our health information is distributed among a number of practitioners and even among family members. Make sure you remember to update your PHR as you have future interactions with healthcare providers and when you have the need to add information to reflect your changing health knowledge and concerns. In that your PHR contains a significant amount of very private information, ensure that you keep it in a safe and protected location (in the case of a physical copy of your PHR) or determine if any online system that you might utilize has safeguards in place to adequately protect your data.

**Online Maintenance of a Personal Health Record**

Personal health records have their origin as a paper-based recording approach. Internet-based systems that have developed during the last decade, however, offer significant advantages over such traditional recording systems. Internet-based systems allow for easy entering and access of information directly from one's home computer. While there are a number of free online PHR systems (see below), these are often limited in their functionality and some individuals opt to utilize either a pay or subscription service.
As mentioned previously, the move toward online record keeping of one's personal health information offers many benefits for the individual. First, it is becoming more commonplace for one's healthcare professional to use electronic health records that can be accessed through a specified patient gateway [8]. Keep in mind, however, that this information will be limited to those interactions that one has had with that particular professional or treatment group. A true PHR is often more comprehensive in that it can contain information from multiple sources, as well as from the patient themselves. If your physician does utilize such an online system, this allows you to view the information that your physician has on record and you can, therefore, suggest corrections if any of this information is wrong or incomplete [9]. This is generally a good place to start in your collection of information that will ultimately comprise your PHR.

Information in Internet-based PHRs is stored on a remote server and, as such, is able to be accessed and edited from most any computer with web access. Often, such online systems have the capability to backup data, print the entire PHR or select portions of the record, import data from other compatible information systems, and share information with approved relatives and healthcare providers. Also, some PHRs provide services such as electronic messaging between individuals and their health care providers and even the ability to check potential drug interactions [10].

Unfortunately, as with any other form of online information, there is the threat that PHRs may be vulnerable to unauthorized access [11]. Also, in that this information is stored electronically, there is the possibility of loss because of damage to the web server wherein it is housed. It is recommended, therefore, that even if one is utilizing an online PHR system, they either download a copy of their records to their personal computer (or other storage device) or periodically print a hard copy for safe keeping.

Beyond concerns of unauthorized access, the savvy consumer will determine who will have authorized access to their online health
information before an Internet-based PHR is established. This information should be detailed fully on the website of the PHR. If it is not, either contact the site administrators directly or avoid this particular site. According to Dr. Steven Schwatzberg, Associate Professor of Surgery at Harvard Medical School and a medical informatics expert, if you do decide to establish an electronic medical record, only include information, "you wouldn't mind reading on the front page of your local newspaper" [12].

**Online Resources**

A host of Internet-based systems have been developed that greatly simplify the processes of creating and keeping one's personal health record. There is considerable variety in the features provided by these systems and a wise consumer will take the time to compare the functionality of these systems to best identify one that will meet their individual needs. Following are some online locations wherein an individual can begin development of their own PHR. This is, by no means, an all-inclusive list; it is merely a representation of the vast array of free Internet sites dedicated to the development of a personal health record [13].

- Dr I-Net -http://www.drinet.com/
- EMRy Stick -http://www.emrystick.com/download.htm
- Healthy Circles -https://www.healthycircles.com/
- iHealth Record -http://www.ihealthrecord.org/
- MyHealth Folders -https://myhealthfolders.com/
- MiVIA -https://www.mivia.org/
There are also a number of premium sites wherein you will pay for service. If none of the sites listed above provides the services and functionality that you desire, these pay sites can be found with a simple Internet search.

**Conclusion**

While recent in their formal development, the establishment and maintenance of an online personal health record provides a convenient way for an individual to organize their health information. They have proven themselves a useful not only in terms of ease of access to information, but also as a mechanism for individuals to better retain a level of individual control over their health and health care.

**ENDNOTES**


[3] Ibid.


[12] Ibid.