



Topic Brief: Patient Access to Radiology Records

Date: 5/13/2022

Nomination Number: 0980

Purpose: This topic brief summarizes information addressing the nomination submitted through the AHRQ Effective Health Care Website on May 7, 2022. This information was used to inform the Evidence-Based Practice Center (EPC) Program's decisions about whether to produce an evidence review on the topic, and if so, what type of evidence product would be most appropriate.

Issue: Patient access to electronic health records in the United States (U.S.) is regulated by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and the more recently adopted 21st Century Cures Act.^{1,2} The nominator of this topic is concerned that patients continue experiencing barriers in accessing their radiology records.

Program Decision: The AHRQ EPC Program does not provide medical services and does not develop policies or regulate how records should be shared with patients. This topic is outside of the purview of the EPC Program.

Background

In 1996, HIPAA granted patients access to all aspects of their medical record.¹ The 21st Century Cures Act of 2016 further expanded that access by mandating flexibility in how and with whom patients can share their electronic health records.² Radiology studies, such as x-ray and MRI images and the associated imaging interpretation reports are a part of their health record and must also be accessible.

Research shows that patients prefer the convenience of accessing their radiology records online over the use of compact CDs.³ Two recent reviews found that online patient portals provided efficient access to health data and can improve patients' engagement in care, enhance the patient-physician relationship, and reduce care costs.^{4,5} Other studies that specifically examined patient preferences related to accessing radiology records showed that more than half of all patients who had online access to these records reviewed them, and that most patients wanted access to both radiology images and the associated interpretation reports.⁶

Despite patient preference for convenient online access, most U.S. healthcare organizations rely predominantly on the use of compact CDs. A 2018 cross-sectional survey that compared the patient request process for imaging studies at 80 U.S. hospitals found that the majority of surveyed institutions provided radiology records using CDs and only four percent enabled access through online patient portals.⁷

Related Resources

Over the course of our assessment of this topic we identified additional information that might be useful to the nominator. The American College of Radiology (ACR) and the Radiological Society of North America (RSNA) have co-created a public information website (radiologyinfo.org) to educate patients, families, and healthcare providers regarding access to their radiology records and basic interpretation of common imaging studies.⁹

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Conflict of Interest:

None of the investigators have any affiliations or financial involvement that conflicts with the material presented in this brief.

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