



Rx: Health Care FYI #5

Subject: *Know Thyself: The Importance of Patient Responsibility*

From: *Rep. Tim Murphy (PA-18)*

Lowering health care costs begins with personal responsibility.

The Problem: Incomplete patient medical files can delay medical care or lead to unnecessary tests and inappropriate treatments. When patients keep a file of important medical information it lowers health care costs, and reduces medical errors.

Background:

- Only one-third of Americans have ever tried to gather and organize their families' health histories. (Healthstyles Survey, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. August 2004).
- Incomplete or inaccurate information in a patient's medical file can lead to medical errors with diagnostic tests, treatments (including drugs, therapies and surgery).
- A study of 1,614 patient visits at primary care clinics found that laboratory and radiology results, letters, medication and medical histories were missing in one out of every seven cases. In 44 percent of these cases, doctors felt that the missing information had the potential to adversely affect a patient's well-being. In nearly 60 percent of the cases, the lack of information resulted in delayed care or additional treatment. (Smith, Peter. Et. al. "Missing Clinical Information During Primary Care Visits," The Journal of the American Medical Association, February 2005.)

What's in a patient's personal medical file?

- Complete family medical history (including family health risks such as heart disease, diabetes, etc.) physician visits, allergies, treatments, illnesses and immunizations.

Patient responsibility:

- While a number of technologies such as Electronic Medical Records (EMRs) can centralize all patient information to aide physicians in making a diagnosis, EMRs may only contain information already compiled from patients and after medical testing. A complete, up to date medical history is necessary when creating an EMR.
- Patients should keep the file up to date, store them in a secure place and bring the file when visiting a new doctor or hospital.

The federal government's role:

- In November 2004, the Surgeon General and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) launched a Family History Initiative to encourage all Americans to learn about their families' health histories as a way of promoting personal health and preventing disease. Americans are also encouraged to use their family gatherings as a time to collect important family health history information that can benefit all family members.
- To help gather family history information, HHS has a free computer program that organizes important health information into a printout that can be taken to a health care professional to help determine whether a patient is at higher risk for disease. The printout can also be placed in a patient's medical record. The new computerized tool, called "My Family Health Portrait," can be downloaded at <http://www.hhs.gov/familyhistory/>.
- Health care providers utilizing electronic medical records see fewer instances of incomplete patient records. According to one recent study, electronic medical records could save \$77.8 billion a year or 5% of the nation's total annual health-care costs. (Center for Information Technology Leadership, Health Affairs; January 2005). Congress should continue to promote the use of national standards for electronic medical records and provide incentives for health care practices to convert paper systems to electronic medical records. (The President has proposed \$125 million in the FY 06 Budget to meet his goal to assure most Americans have electronic health records.)

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Congressman Tim Murphy, a member of the Energy and Commerce Committee, is a psychologist, and holds two Adjunct Associate Professor positions at the University of Pittsburgh (Pediatrics, and Public Health). He is Co-chair of both the Congressional 21st Century Healthcare Caucus and the Congressional Mental Health Caucus.