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Portability of Records

An e-article for clinicians by
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Today I am taking up the concept of the portability of records kept on a computer. Aside from taking a few charts home with you in order to write a disability report or a comprehensive letter to someone it is pretty impractical to have all your paper charts with you wherever you go. Would it be helpful to have all your records with you if there was a way to do it safely? Let's take a look at the advantages it might offer. You could document phone calls, refer to the clinical chart if you talk with another clinician, or hospitalize someone. You could work on a report that required the client's records. If you knew which report you were going to do you could take that chart with you before you left your office for the day. Unfortunately for many of us, we don't think that far ahead so the determination of which chart you might work on at home is left until you get home. For psychiatrists it is always helpful to have the name and phone number of the pharmacy, the meds someone is on, the known allergies and the doses available. Portability makes medication management of a large number of patients possible. For generic meds you can simply phone them in but for brand name you have to fax an original script in. It is nice to be able to do it at the time and not leave it for tomorrow.

Do any clinicians work on things at home? It is rare that a clinician doesn't work on things at home. Often it is a report, a letter to someone, or some communication with another clinician they couldn't reach during the day that occurs. Sometimes it is a more formal response to someone. Until you actually have portable records it is hard to conceptualize how helpful they might be. Once you do, you realize what you have been missing.

It might seem to be an invasion of your privacy to have your records at home but I have heard that many clinicians do work at home, and have some of their best ideas outside of the office. We don't confine our speculations just to the office. If you tend to have trouble switching gears, this is a good opportunity to get flexible in the way you deal with things and to allocate time to the parts of your life that you should.

A number of clinicians have asked if their records can be truly portable and secure and I assure them they can.

Can records be transported safely? Yes, they can. For desktop users USB flash drives are perfect. Simply make a copy of the passworded database containing your records. Because the program is passworded that stops the casual snoop. Then no one can access the records in transit. At home, simply plug in the USB drive, restore the database to your program installed at home and you have complete records there. Reverse the process in the morning when you go off to work.

Laptop users have it even easier. They don't have to do anything other than take their laptop home with them. In this case USB drives are simply the means to backup the database and keep it secure. USB flash drives are quite inexpensive. A 1gb drive from Crucial is about \$11.99. Keep two at the office and two at home. Do a backup of the database Wednesdays at the office and Saturday at home. You then have 4 copies and off site storage for your records. A flood in Augusta, Maine in 1987 wiped out a lot of records. It could have been prevented by the use of a few small easily used USB drives. Fires, floods, tornadoes, can all happen. I hate to run scared but it is comforting to know my records are essentially bomb proof.

I lost my hard drive in the summer of 2005. It sounded like a good quality bed sheet was being torn. I was really concerned to say the least. I called Computer Discount Warehouse and got a new hard drive. After installation and putting my programs back on it, I restored the database and was up and running again in 10 minutes. I didn't lose a file. I breathed a big sigh of relief. That is the first time in 17 years that that has happened but it did happen when I least expected it. Good thing I had backups!

New laptops are so light and easy to carry, and so powerful that they are a tremendous help to the hard pressed clinician. The screens are very clear and the keyboards are easy to work on. The cost is actually quite reasonable. Although I use PC's for the most part I recently bought a MacBook. It is light weight, easy to use, has a great screen and the cost was quite modest. I didn't need a top end machine, or extra RAM. I just bought it new as is with no extra features. It works like a charm!

Some practitioners have more than one office location. The laptop is the logical answer for that. Laptop screens are now so excellent that you really aren't at a disadvantage compared to desktop users. Those with hospital practices can also use these programs to advantage.

So portability of records can come in mighty handy for the hard pressed clinician and make it possible to be even more flexible in the way you work.

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