Audit of medical records: Use of a structured form in emergency departments

To the Editor: Medical records may be considered to be any information and documents kept in a systematic, scientific and easy way that help clinicians retrieve the required data on a patient at the time it is needed. They can cover a wide range of material including handwritten notes, computerised records, correspondence between health professionals, laboratory reports, imaging reports, videos and printouts from monitoring equipment.

Surgical departments in South Africa (SA) have been grossly inadequate in applying the standards set out for adequate records. Raff and James, in auditing anaesthetic records in KwaZulu-Natal, found that less than one-third of all records were complete or legible. Doctors whose records are inadequate or incomplete are placed at serious medico-legal risk. In attempting to rectify these deficiencies, studies have shown the advantage of using structured, standardised pro forma record forms. Rogers and Haring, in assessing how studies have shown the advantage of using structured records, found that less than one-third of all records were complete or legible.

We recently conducted a study at Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Academic Hospital (CMJAH) to determine whether the introduction of a new structured record form would improve the quality of patient outcomes. The study followed a before and after intervention process with a cross-sectional review of patient files to examine the completeness of emergency department (ED) records taken by doctors, both before and after the introduction of a new record form.

The results showed a significant improvement from baseline to both 1 months ($p<0.05$) and 3 months ($p<0.001$) after the introduction of the structured form. The difference between results at 1 and 3 months was not significant ($p=0.05$). At baseline, only 6 of the 16 variables included in the structured form were recorded in 90% of the records, while at 3 months, 13 of 16 were captured more than 90% of the time.

Results showed, as with studies elsewhere, that the introduction of a structured, preprinted record form significantly improved record keeping by doctors, and produces records which are more reliable from both a clinical management and a medico-legal perspective. The new record form is an attempt to fulfill the guidelines for a valid, comprehensive record form set out by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA). Its introduction has led to a significant and sustained improvement in record keeping.

The record keeping challenges faced by CMJAH doctors are not peculiar to this institution. Therefore, future longitudinal studies of the new form, as well as testing it in other healthcare facilities, might be a precursor to creating a standardised record form for use in EDs across the SA public health sector, with implications for improved patient care.

F Motara
Emergency Unit, Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Academic Hospital, Johannesburg, South Africa, and Department of Emergency Medicine, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

A Bentley
Department of Internal Medicine, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Z Mahomed
M Moolla
A Laher
Emergency Unit, Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Academic Hospital, Johannesburg, South Africa, and Department of Emergency Medicine, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

B Sparks
Department of Family Medicine, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa
