Perceptions about Use of a Patient Internet Portal among Medicaid Beneficiaries

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ABSTRACT

Patient Internet portals that allow patients to access their personal health information are an emerging form of enabling technology. The purported benefits from increasing use of information technology in healthcare, however, may not be universal because of a widening digital divide along racial and socioeconomic lines. In this pilot study, we surveyed 31 Medicaid beneficiaries to ascertain their interest in and projected use of a healthcare patient Internet portal. We found that most Medicaid beneficiaries were very interested in accessing personal health information about themselves or their dependents online. Moreover, ninety percent of respondents reported that they have access to the Internet, and sixty-eight percent of those with Internet access use the Internet once a week or more.

INTRODUCTION

As part of the technology innovation for improving healthcare, patient Internet portals are being promoted as a means to enable patients to access their health information and to obtain healthcare services. Evidence suggests that providing patients access to their medical records can improve record quality and enhance communication between patients and providers.1 Unfortunately, there is evidence of a widening digital divide along socioeconomic and racial lines which may prevent all patients from benefiting from these technology innovations.2 In this pilot study, we sought to survey the perceptions of Medicaid beneficiaries regarding the usefulness of patient Internet portals for obtaining personal health information and clinical services.

METHODS

Survey Development. Through a review of relevant literature and three patient Internet portals that are currently in use, we developed a 30 item survey focusing on the perceived usefulness of accessing 8 types of personal health information and 5 types of services via the Internet. The survey also included questions concerning Internet access, frequency of Internet use, and concerns about Internet privacy. Two versions of the survey instrument were created: one for a subject answering for him/herself, and a second for a parent/guardian answering for a minor child enrolled in Medicaid.

Patient Interviews. The interview sample was drawn from a population of 17,070 patients enrolled in a Medicaid-sponsored care management program in Durham County, North Carolina. Telephone interviewers following a scripted protocol attempted to reach subjects (or the parent/guardian of a minor) at least three times. Calls were conducted during daytime, evening and weekend hours in order to optimize opportunities to reach subjects.

RESULTS

Survey Participants. We made 347 calls to 149 subjects. Thirty-one of 34 subjects who were reached by telephone responded to the survey.

Internet Access. Most respondents (90.3%) had access to an Internet connection including 52% with access to a high-speed connection; 68% reported using the Internet at least once a week.

Patient Portal Content of Interest. Subjects were most interested in viewing office visit summaries, records of immunizations and medication lists; and in accessing services to request prescription refills, make clinic appointments, and communicate with their care providers via email. Many subjects (65%) projected that they would access a patient Internet portal two or more times per year.

DISCUSSION

Through this study, we have observed that Medicaid beneficiaries have Internet access and are very interested in viewing health information for themselves or their dependents using the Internet. Our study also suggests that the estimated actual use of such a resource would be relatively infrequent.

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References