Mining Electronic Records for Revealing Health Data

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Over the past decade, nudged by new federal regulations, hospitals and medical offices around the country have been converting scribbled doctors' notes to electronic records. Although the chief goal has been to improve efficiency and cut costs, a disappointing report published last week by the RAND Corp. found that electronic health records actually may be raising the nation's medical bills.

But the report neglected one powerful incentive for the switch to electronic records: the resulting databases of clinical information are gold mines for medical research. The monitoring and analysis of electronic medical records, some scientists say, have the potential to make every patient a participant in a vast, ongoing clinical trial, pinpointing treatments and side effects that would be hard to discern from anecdotal case reports or expensive clinical trials.

"Medical discoveries have always been based on hunches," said Dr. Russ B. Altman, a physician and professor of bioengineering and genetics at Stanford. "Unfortunately, we have been missing discoveries all along because we didn't have the ability to see if a hunch has statistical merit. This infrastructure makes it possible to follow up those hunches."

The use of electronic records also may help scientists avoid sidestep the rising costs of medical research. "In the past, you had to set up incredibly expensive and time-consuming clinical trials to test a hypothesis," said Nicholas Tatonetti, assistant professor of biomedical informatics at Columbia. "Now we can look at data already collected in electronic medical records and begin to tease out information."

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