



# Patient Access to EHRs: A View From the Literature



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*“As younger generations embrace technology, one of the oldest tools in medicine, the doctor’s note, is in its infancy of reform.”*

(Feeley & Shine, 2011)

## Research Methods

Currently, the literature is inundated with opinions and news stories on providing patients access to their EHRs. Here, I focus only on the most current scholarly and research-defined articles regarding this topic.



## A “Meaningful Use” Requirement

Part of the “Meaningful Use” incentive program that governs the use of certified Electronic Health Records (EHRs) includes “providing patients with electronic versions of their health information” (Blumenthal & Tavenner, 2010, 503). As more and more eligible professionals and hospitals seek to qualify for the incentive program, patient-accessible records will become more universal.

## Attitudes of Patients and Health Professionals

Research shows that patients are overwhelmingly positive about gaining access to their health records. Delbanco (2012) found that the majority of patients reported:

- Increased sense of control
- Greater understanding of their medical issues
- Improved recall of their plans for care
- Better preparation for future visits.

The attitudes of health professionals are more varied:

- Walker, et. al. (2011) found that many PCPs anticipated lengthier visits, increased demand on their time between visits, and many worried about frightening and confusing patients and writing about contentious issues such as mental health, substance abuse, and obesity.
- Levielle, et. al. (2012) found that the majority of PCPs agreed to voluntarily join the intervention, despite their concerns
- Walker, et. al. (2011) found that about 3 out of 4 participating PCPs thought *patient satisfaction would improve*

Nurses, on the other hand, are much more supportive of the practice overall. Rodriguez, et. al. (2011) found that nurses, unlike physicians, demonstrated support both before and after the implementation (480).

## Patients Wanting to Share Data

A couple of the studies reported that a large portion of patients anticipated sharing their notes with family, friends, or other health professionals:

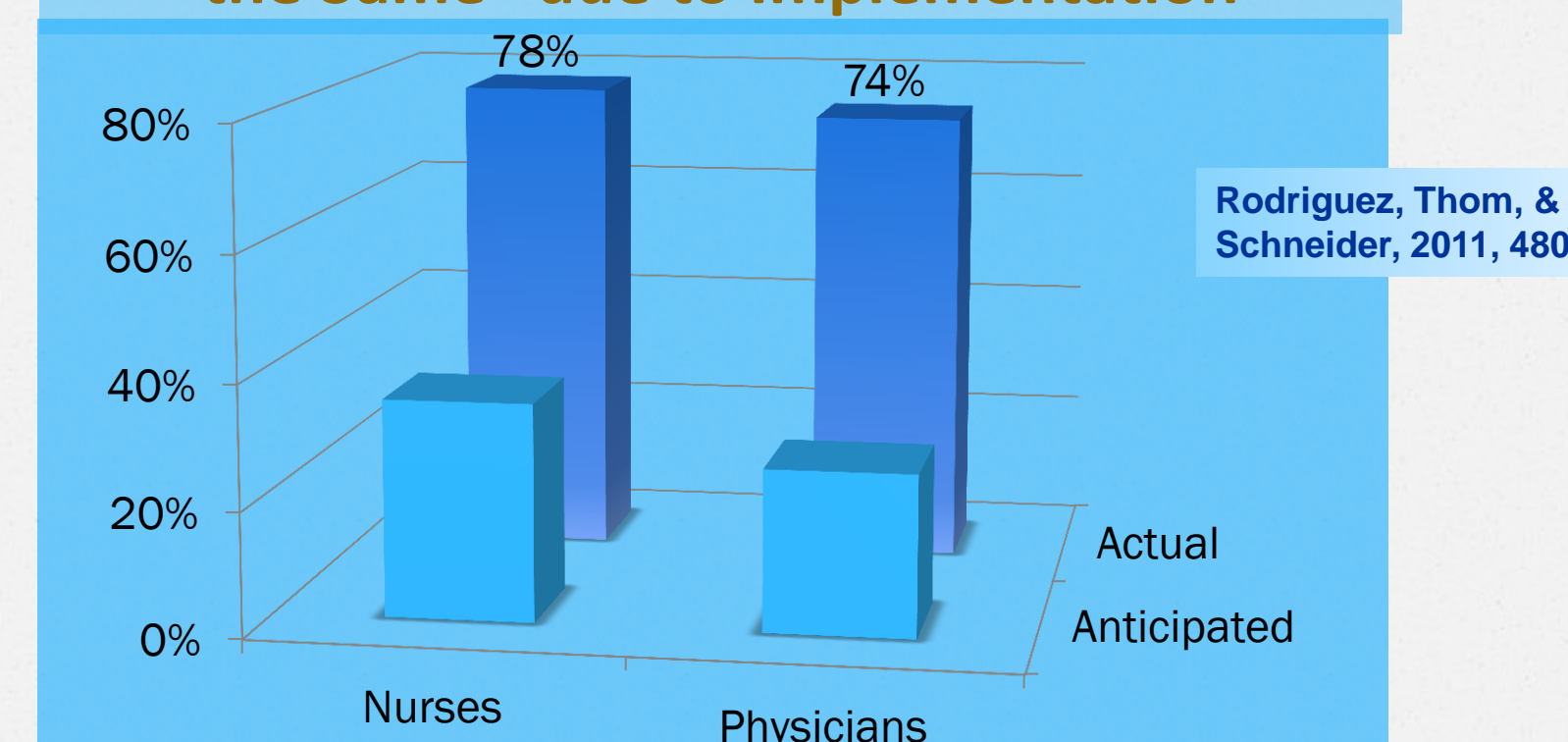
- Walker, et al. (2011) reported that about half of the patients surveyed contemplated sharing their visit notes

## Nursing Workload Study

While many studies report that doctors and nurses *anticipate* that their workload will increase due to the implementation of patient access to records, Rodriguez, Thom, & Schneider (2011) set out to measure the actual changes that occur. They implemented a study that provided patients with access to their health records, surveying physicians and nurses both before and after implementation. On the first survey, participants were asked what they anticipated would happen to their workload, and on the second, they were asked what actually happened.

According to this research, the majority of nurses and physicians reported that their workload had significantly decreased or stayed the same .

## Workload Reported to “Decrease or Stay the Same” due to Implementation



## Display Format, Content, and At-Risk Patients

A few of the studies made patient-friendly adaptations to their electronic records. For example, Rodriguez, Thom, & Schneider (2011) noted that they “removed the red exclamation mark” that regularly appeared next to measured patient results that fell out of range (477). Some studies reported a small number of patients mentioning strong language in the notes, but reactions differed:

- One patient bitterly recalled the doctor using the word “hostile” to describe him in one of the notes (Woods, et. al., 2013, e65).
- Another patient saw that the doctor referred to him as “mildly obese” in the notes, and subsequently felt empowered to start exercising daily and improve his health (Delbanco, et. al., 2012, 468).

Other studies were careful to exclude certain groups of patients altogether from having access, based on being categorized as “at risk,” such as patients recently diagnosed with substance abuse or HIV. One study noted that there are socio-economic barriers to accessing the internet (Burke, et. al., 2010).

## Some Questions That Arise

- “Are patients overly optimistic about how helpful the notes will be?”
  - or
  - “Do doctors underestimate their resourcefulness and resilience when they encounter arcane or worrisome language?”
- (Walker, et. al., 2011, 117)

## Conclusion

Overall, scholarly research shows that many health professionals and almost all patients are enthusiastic about patients gaining access to EHRs. The biggest challenge lies in addressing many health professionals’ anxieties regarding providing access. The largest concern is perceived workload changes, so more studies need to focus on measuring actual workload changes experienced by health professionals.

Since providing patients access to EHRs is part of the “Meaningful Use” objectives, and because the literature is inundated with opinion pieces and news articles on the topic, providers should focus on scholarly research on this provoking topic.

See handout for references