Slipping Through the Net: Catching EHR Medication Errors

If medication is mis-administered it could cause severe harm to a patient – or even death. The route that many hospitals take to avoid errors is using electronic health records (EHR) systems that alert providers when issues arise.

But a new report has discovered that the EHR system is not foolproof.

Written by the Leapfrog Group, a national nonprofit organisation that investigates quality and safety of American healthcare, the report focuses on the efficacy of electronic systems preventing medication errors.

The majority of healthcare facilities that take part in the Leapfrog Group's annual survey use a computerised order entry system for prescriptions through their EHR.

The group devised a test for hospitals that involved them creating a "dummy chart" that was for a fake patient. Clinical staff then used their facility's electronic medication ordering system for prescription submission and to identify which were flagged for review.

Alarmingly, nearly 49 percent of issues that could potentially harm patients went undetected. Problems included drug interactions and outright faulty prescriptions.

For example, potentially serious issues like incorrect dosage and appropriate drugs often went unchecked by the system.

The failures of the systems were even more serious: 13 percent of errors that could have killed patients went undetected.

Avoiding Errors

In order to avoid such potentially serious errors, Leapfrog suggests the following:

- Checking medication orders manually alongside EHR use before and after prescriptions entered in the system;
- On patient admission, getting an accurate list of all medications a patient is taking, including the name, dosage and frequency. This should be used as a baseline for drug prescription while the patient is in hospital;
- Creating a "frequently used drugs" list in an EHR or computerised prescription ordering system to avoid providers needing to scroll through a long list of medications;
- Encouraging clinical staff to speak out if they notice something which does not seem right with any medications a provider orders for a patient.

Prevention of medication errors requires open communication and teamwork without fear of punishment. It is imperative that a hospital makes staff feel comfortable about monitoring and speaking up about medication issues.

Source: Health Care Business Tech

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