

BMJ 2004;328:1209 (15 May),

Discontents

One of the chief causes of present day discontent among doctors in America is the constant pressure to document in tedious detail every interaction with patients. Two things are responsible for this, the first being the unresolved malpractice crisis, resulting in doctors being repeatedly warned that what is not documented is as if it had not been done.

The second is the government's obsession that it might be paying for services that were not rendered. Some years ago government agencies issued regulations requiring doctors to document how many systems of the body they examined, so that they would be paid according to whether they had examined only the throat and chest, or also the abdomen and nervous system. These rules persist in a modified way, and doctors are paid according to codes of increasing complexity, with the implied understanding that these services be documented under pain of having to return the money or be accused of fraud.

Each year the government sends anti-fraud squads to ferret out irregularities; and recently a distinguished university professor and department chairman was heavily fined, barely escaped being jailed, and lost his job for signing billing forms for services rendered by his residents while he was not bodily present.

In this atmosphere of suspicion, professors and general practitioners alike (for to the government all medical "providers" are the same) are assiduously scribbling away to stay out of trouble, so that medical records grow large, irrelevant, and unintelligible. On rounds the professor writes notes instead of teaching, while the students who once did the clerking stand impatiently.

And then of course there are the computers. Surely they must be the answer, for imagine airlines making reservations and issuing tickets written by hand. But medicine is more complex, many doctors type badly, few medical computer systems are user friendly, and indeed some time ago doctors in one hospital group rebelled and refused to use them. No doubt better technology will come, with voice recognition, scanners to incorporate data sent from elsewhere, and easier ways to access and display data. Perhaps also some of this mania for documentation will abate. But this is for the future, still far away from the winter of present discontent.