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Successful System, Incomplete Data: Caveats in Reusing Activity Data from Emergency-Department Whiteboards

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Abstract

During the daily treatment of patients large quantities of data are recorded in electronic health records (EHRs). Compared to data in paper records, these EHR data are easily available for reuse in research and quality improvement. However, the opportunities for reuse depend on the quality of the data. In this study we analyze the completeness with which main treatment activities are recorded on emergency department (ED) whiteboards and whether completeness varies with the severity of the patients' condition. Data from 381231 ED visits show that after the whiteboard had been in successful use for several years the clinicians recorded four of the five main treatment activities with a completeness of less than 50%. Completeness tended to increase with three indicators of the severity of the patient's condition: triage level, length of stay, and patient age. We conclude that the low completeness of the activity data probably prevents most types of reuse.

Keywords:

Quality improvement, electronic health records, emergency services.

Introduction

The substitution of electronic for paper records has been a major development in healthcare organizations over the past decades. Electronic health records (EHRs) contain large quantities of data. These data are recorded during the daily treatment and care of patients but, subsequently, available for other uses. EHRs have been associated with unprecedented opportunities for improving healthcare through the reuse of EHR data for clinical research, quality improvement, and other data-driven efforts to learn from past events [7]. However, such learning requires quality data. In this regard Weiskopf and Weng [16] contend that EHRs have "led not to improvements in the quality of the data being recorded, but rather to the recording of a greater quantity of bad data" (p.144). This study focuses on the data recorded on electronic whiteboards in emergency departments (EDs), which are the common entry point to hospital treatment for most patients.

ED whiteboards contain data about the patients and their flow through the ED, such as the patients' time of arrival, triage level, current treatment activity, responsible clinician, and lab test results. Ready access to these data is central to the coordination of ED work and to each ED clinician's sense of overview [8; 11]. In addition to supporting work in the ED as it unfolds, the whiteboard recordings provide opportunities for learning. These learning opportunities include that the recordings can be used for forecasting temporal patterns in patient arrivals, determining waiting and boarding times, identifying bottlenecks in the patient flow, assessing whether length of stay (LOS) targets are met, comparing the patient mix of EDs, and researching how the coordination of ED work is accomplished. Learning about these issues is important because the ED is a stressful environment for patients [5] as well as clinicians [4]. Improved knowledge of patient flows and resource bottlenecks can help EDs streamline work procedures, dynamically match resources to patient volumes, and prevent ED crowding [13]. We are involved in such learning efforts in the EDs in Region Zealand, one of the five healthcare regions in Denmark [e.g., 9; 11]. In the present study we analyze almost three years of log data from the whiteboards in the four EDs of the region *to assess the completeness with which main treatment activities are recorded and whether completeness varies with indicators of the severity of the patient's condition*. Information about the time spent on the different treatment activities is, for example, crucial to understanding how crowding arises and when countermeasures are required. Thus, the generation of accurate forecasts of crowding presupposes reasonably complete recordings of the treatment activities.

Weiskopf and Weng [16] identify three fundamental dimensions of data quality – completeness, correctness, and currency – and two auxiliary dimensions (concordance and plausibility) that often serve as proxies for the fundamental dimensions when they cannot be assessed directly. Completeness, the focus of this study, concerns whether a piece of data about a patient is present in the EHR. Correctness concerns whether the data that are present in EHRs are also accurate. And currency concerns whether the data are representative of the patient's state at a desired point in time, often interpreted as whether the data are recorded in the EHR within a reasonable period of time following measurement. Previous studies have demonstrated that the data quality is modest for multiple types of EHR data [2; 7; 12; 14]. For example, Chan et al. [2] reviewed the completeness of blood-pressure recordings across multiple studies and found that the number of complete recordings ranged from 0.1% to 51%. In addition, Brennan et al. [1] found that British hospital statistics for 2009-2010 showed nearly 20000 adults attending pediatric outpatient services and over 8000 males admitted to gynecology inpatient wards. Several reasons have been proposed to explain modest data quality, including habits, lack of time, failure to capture data that became available to clinicians who were not part of the department, and transcription errors in transferring data from paper charts to EHR [e.g., 12; 14]. At root, data quality suffers from differences in priorities between day-to-day clinical work and work such as research and quality improvement. In day-to-day clinical work data quality is secondary to patient treatment.

Method

The four EDs in Region Zealand were part of medium-sized hospitals and collectively served a population of approximately 817000 citizens. Prior to conducting the study we obtained approval from the healthcare region.

The Whiteboard

The EDs introduced the same electronic whiteboard in December 2009 (ED1), January 2010 (ED2), January 2011 (ED3), and May 2011 (ED4). The whiteboard supplemented the electronic patient record by providing procedural information about the patients. Some of the whiteboard data, such as lab-test results, were automatically updated when new data became available, but the majority of the whiteboard data were entered and updated manually. In this study we focused exclusively on data that were entered and updated manually. Manual data entry and update could be done on the wall-mounted whiteboard displays (see Figure 1) as well as on any other computer in the EDs.

Figure 1 – The whiteboard at ED4. For each patient the whiteboard gives one row of information, including time of arrival, triage level, first name, age, responsible physician, current treatment activity, lab-test results, and next stop.

Before turning to analyze the completeness of the whiteboard data and thereby their reuse potential, it is important to note that the whiteboard was successful for its primary purpose of supporting the clinical work in the EDs. In interviews conducted as part of our other activities relating to the whiteboard a physician at ED3, for example, said that "*It gives a great overview. I cannot imagine that we could do without it.*" Along similar lines a nurse at ED1 expressed that "*We use it all the time*". More formally, a survey at ED1 and ED2 showed that the clinicians experienced an improvement in their overview of their work when the electronic whiteboard replaced the former dry-erase whiteboards [8]. The survey also showed that the clinicians experienced that the electronic whiteboard to a larger extent made information available where and when they needed it.

Log Data

All changes of the whiteboard content were automatically logged. For the purpose of this study the whiteboard vendor, Imatis, produced a version of the logs from which all patient names, clinician names, and other information that might identify persons had been removed. These anonymized log data covered the three-year period 2012-2014. However, we had to discard the periods January 2013 - January 2014 (ED1) and November 2013 - January 2014 (ED2-ED4) from the analysis because they contained long intervals of no data. After also removing 741 outliers (defined as ED visits longer than seven days, i.e. more than 50 times the median length of stay), the dataset comprised 381231 ED visits. Table 1 shows the division of the visits onto EDs and years.

Table 1 – The 381231 ED visits divided onto ED and year

ED	2012 *(Jan-Dec)*	2013 *(Jan-Oct)*	2014 *(Feb-Dec)*
ED1	33040	-	30719
ED2	40445	32844	37396
ED3	32677	28527	34304
ED4	38670	32628	39981

The data for the 381231 ED visits consisted of over 10 million log entries, each documenting an event that changed the whiteboard content. A log entry contained a timestamp, an event type, any values associated with the event, and a system-generated identifier of the visit to which the event pertained. For example, the event type 'WAITING_FORChanged' along with the event value 'Nurse' indicated that the patient was now waiting to be seen by a nurse. This event type marked the start of a treatment activity in the patient's progress through the ED workflow. Across the EDs different sets of treatment activities (i.e., different sets of event values) were used for indicating the stages of this workflow. However, the workflows of the EDs shared five main activities: triage, waiting to be seen by a nurse, waiting to be seen by a physician, examination (by a junior physician), and review (by a senior physician). No other treatment activity was recorded more consistently than these five main activities. The log data also contained information about changes in, among other things, responsible physician and lab-test results but in this study we focus on the five main treatment activities because the flow of the patients through the ED is important to, for example, forecasting and preventing crowding.

Results

The possibility to record the patients' progress through the ED workflow was included on the whiteboard because at-a-glance access to this information was deemed important to the ED clinicians' overview of their collective work. Yet, even the five main treatment activities were recorded for only a subset of the ED visits, see Table 2. The main activity recorded most and least often differed across the EDs. In ED3 and ED4 waiting to be seen by a nurse was recorded for 74% and 76%, respectively, of the patients in 2014 and for similarly high percentages of patients in the preceding years. The only other activity recorded for the majority of the patients was waiting to be seen by a physician in ED2 (52% in 2014). Conversely, the activity of triage was recorded for less than 1% of the patients in ED1 and ED3. For all EDs at least one of the five activities was recorded for no more than 20% of the patients.

It could be hoped that the completeness of the recordings increased over time because the clinicians appreciated the improved overview or became more conscientious in their use of the whiteboard. The data provided little ground for such hopes. Rather, the trends in the data from 2012 to 2014 showed a mixed picture with nine increasing trends, four decreasing trends, and seven unchanging trends (Table 2). It should also be noted that prior to 2012 the whiteboard had been in operational use at the EDs for between half a year and two years; thus, work procedures involving the whiteboard had had time to stabilize.

Table 2 – Completeness of the recordings of the five main treatment activities

Treatment activity	2012		2013		2014		Trend [a]
	N	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*	
ED1							
Triage	12	0.04	-	-	3	0.01	→
Nurse	267	0.81	-	-	143	0.47	→
Physician	5552	17	-	-	6404	21	↗
Examination	11292	34	-	-	11252	37	↗
Review	8264	25	-	-	8935	29	↗
ED2							
Triage	10028	25	9521	29	11871	32	↗
Nurse	4604	11	3565	11	3435	9	↘
Physician	19616	49	14919	45	19459	52	↗
Examination	14217	35	11161	34	11217	30	↘
Review	17772	44	14436	44	17228	46	↗
ED3							
Triage	37	0.11	37	0.13	22	0.06	→
Nurse	24270	74	17896	63	25436	74	→
Physician	10443	32	9576	34	12024	35	↗
Examination	9224	28	7732	27	10269	30	→
Review	1	0.00	1	0.00	0	0.00	→
ED4							
Triage	9867	26	5815	18	7398	19	↘
Nurse	27366	71	25018	77	30201	76	↗
Physician	2770	7	10332	32	15569	39	↗
Examination	8531	22	7163	22	9577	24	→
Review	7793	20	5112	16	6091	15	↘

[a] Trend in completeness from 2012 to 2014: ↗ - an increase of more than 2.00 percentage points, ↘ - a decrease of more than 2.00 percentage points, → - a change of at most 2.00 percentage points.

The first activity in the ED workflow, triage, illustrated the important point that failing to record triage as the current treatment activity for a patient did not indicate that the patient was not triaged. The whiteboard gave the triage code for 77% (ED1), 37% (ED2), 10% (ED3), and 40% (ED4) of the patients. For all four EDs the number of patients with a triage code exceeded the number of patients for which triage was recorded as the current treatment activity. Probably, triaging a patient and recording the triage code were experienced as more clinically relevant by the ED clinicians than recording that their current treatment activity was to triage the patient, especially because triage was a brief procedure.

An important consideration in assessing the possibilities for data reuse is whether completeness varies with indicators of the patient's condition. Tables 3 to 5 show how completeness varied with three indicators of the severity of the patient's condition. To save space each table gives the data for only one of the four EDs.

Table 3 shows how completeness varied with triage level in ED 1. Waiting to be seen by a physician was more often recorded as the current treatment activity for patients triaged 4 and 5 (i.e., the most severe cases) and examination and review were most often recorded for patients triaged 2 and 3. It might have been more clinically relevant to record the activity in progress for the patients triaged 2 and 3 because they were in the ED longer than the other patients. For example, many of the patients triaged 4 and 5 were quickly transferred to inpatient departments for specialist treatment. In ED1 the completeness of the treatment activities triage and waiting to be seen by a nurse was largely unaffected by triage level. The patterns for physician and examination were roughly similar in the other EDs, whereas the patterns for triage, nurse, and review were different. For example, waiting to be seen by a nurse in ED4 was recorded for 80% of the patients triaged 2 and 3 but only for about half as many at the other triage levels. When completeness varied with the triage level, it tended to be by higher completeness at medium or high triage levels.

Length of stay (LOS) directly indicates a patient's demand on ED resources and indirectly indicates the severity of the patient's condition. Table 4 shows that the activity of triage tended to be recorded more often for the patients that ended up staying longer in ED2. Waiting to be seen by a physician was most often recorded for the patients who stayed 3-8 hours; ED3 was similar in this respect. In ED2, the activity of review was recorded as the current treatment activity for fewer and fewer patients as LOS increased. The completeness of the review recordings also varied systematically with LOS in ED1 and ED4 but in the opposite direction: completeness increased with increasing LOS. Waiting to be seen by a nurse was the only treatment activity the recording of which did not vary appreciably with LOS in any of the EDs. The four other treatment activities were, in one or two of the EDs, recorded more often with increasing LOS. The only instance of a decreasing trend was for review in ED2.

Table 3 – Completeness of treatment-activity recordings for ED1, divided onto triage levels

Triage level	ED visits	Triage %	Nurse %	Phys. %	Exam. %	Review %
1	1482	0.00	0.00	7	34	38
2	11857	0.01	0.03	12	72	50
3	12131	0.02	0.19	15	70	56
4	23230	0.05	1	28	16	12
5	397	0.00	5	24	1	2

Note. The table includes only the 49097 (77%) ED1 visits for which the triage level was available.

Because older patients tend to be weaker than younger patients, we use age as a third indicator of the severity of the patient's condition. In ED4, waiting to be seen by a nurse was

recorded less often with increasing patient age, while waiting to be seen by a physician, examination, and review were recorded more often with increasing patient age, see Table 5. In the other EDs waiting to be seen by a nurse was recorded about equally often for the different age groups but the pattern for waiting to be seen by a physician and for examination resembled that in ED4. In ED1 the pattern for the activity of review also resembled that in ED4, but in ED2 it was reversed (as it was for LOS). The pattern that completeness tended to increase with increasing patient age was stronger than the patterns for triage and LOS.

Table 4 – Completeness of treatment-activity recordings for ED2, divided onto length of stay (LOS)

LOS ***(hours)***	**ED visits**	**Triage** ***%***	**Nurse** ***%***	**Phys.** ***%***	**Exam.** ***%***	**Review** ***%***
0-2	63490	22	9	41	27	54
3-5	32087	35	12	61	41	39
6-8	5533	38	14	67	47	27
9-11	1896	32	9	55	39	19
12-	7679	42	11	53	37	11

Table 5 – Completeness of treatment-activity recordings for ED4, divided onto patient age

Patient age ***(years)***	**ED visits**	**Triage** ***%***	**Nurse** ***%***	**Phys.** ***%***	**Exam.** ***%***	**Review** ***%***
0-19	12982	16	82	15	8	7
20-39	15753	28	77	30	24	19
40-59	19265	29	73	37	31	23
60-79	21026	27	71	42	39	29
80-	11531	17	68	43	40	30

Note. The table includes only the 80557 (72%) ED4 visits for which the patient age was available.

For all three indicators the overall, but not unanimous, pattern was that completeness increased when the indicator pointed toward patients with more severe conditions.

Discussion

After the whiteboard had been in successful use in the EDs for 2-4 years the five main treatment activities were in 2014 recorded for an average of 13% (triage), 40% (nurse), 37% (physician), 30% (examination), and 23% (review) of the patients. These averages hide considerable variation across the EDs but no ED recorded more than one treatment activity with a completeness of more than 50% and all EDs recorded at least one treatment activity with a completeness of less than 20%. The substantial incompleteness in the recording of the patients' current treatment activity is the result of a constant tension between treating patients and documenting treatments. Another result of this tension is that the incompleteness is not randomly distributed. Rather, completeness tended to increase with increasing triage level, LOS, and – most strongly – patient age. We make two conclusions from the analysis:

- The incompleteness of the activity data is substantial, probably preventing most types of reuse.
- Reusing the data incurs a bias toward patients with more severe conditions.

The former finding confirms previous research [2; 14], thereby indicating that EHRs should mainly be assessed on the basis of how well they fulfil their primary purpose of supporting the day-to-day clinical work. The latter finding acknowledges that the mere existence of large quantities of real-world EHR data provides impetus for their reuse [7]. If the data are reused it is important to be aware of their limitations. The bias toward patients whose triage level, LOS, and age indicate a more severe condition extends the finding by Rusanov et al. [15] that EHRs contain more data about the sicker patients.

Part of the reason for data incompleteness is that the decision about whether to record the data is often left to the clinicians' discretion. This practice acknowledges the primacy of the day-to-day clinical work. Somewhat surprisingly it remains unclear in many studies of the quality of EHR data [e.g., 2; 12] whether it was mandatory for the clinicians to record the data. Frequently, transitional artifacts fill a gap between the clinical work and the formal documentation of it [3]. Such transitional artifacts hold procedural information important in performing the work but, at the same time, the transitional artifacts are exempted from the formal documentation requirements. The whiteboard in the present study is an example of a transitional artifact. That is, the clinicians were not formally required to keep the whiteboard current. While this may contribute to explaining the incomplete data, a formal requirement to record the treatment activities will not necessarily result in complete data. For example, Granlien and Hertzum [6] found that none of eight mandated work procedures associated with an electronic medication record were followed consistently by more than 48% of the wards at the studied hospitals.

Another reason for the incomplete data is that the treatment activities had to be recorded manually. Activity data are, for example, pertinent in moving the modelling of ED crowding beyond models based solely on when patients arrive in the ED [10]. Thus, the introduction of a tool that forecasts ED crowding on the basis of activity data might motivate the clinicians to record these data more consistently. Alternatively, it might be possible to derive activity data automatically from other data. For example, the recording of a patient's triage level indicates the end of the activity of triage and is, in most cases, also a good indicator that the patient has now transitioned to the activity of waiting to be seen by a nurse. The triage level was not recorded for all patients, but in all EDs it was recorded more often than that the patient was waiting to be seen by a nurse. Thus, the requirement for manual data entry can probably be reduced by deriving additional activity data from other whiteboard data or from EHR data. While automatic data derivation will likely improve completeness [2], data correctness may suffer because manual data entry likely captures some nonsensical data. In balancing manual data entry against automatic data derivation it should also be considered that automatic data derivation frees clinician time for other activities.

Finally, the bias of the recorded data toward patients with more severe conditions is reassuring from a clinical point of view because it suggests that the clinicians attend more to the patients who are more in need of clinical attention. It may, however, be impossible to compensate for this bias when the data are reused, thereby confounding any analyses performed by reusing the data.

Limitations

Two limitations should be remembered in interpreting the results of this study. First, the data are from EDs in one healthcare region of one country. While the four EDs show

that the results of the study are not peculiar to one ED, it would be valuable to replicate the study in other countries with other healthcare systems. Second, we can merely speculate about the reasons for the incomplete recording of the treatment activities. While the log data quantify the magnitude of this incompleteness, interviews or other qualitative data would be needed to explain why the clinicians like the whiteboard but often leave the recording of the treatment activities incomplete.

Conclusion

Changes to the content of electronic ED whiteboards are logged and thereby available for later inspection and reuse. Such log data provide opportunities for forecasting ED crowding, identifying bottlenecks in the ED workflow, and – more generally – for reusing EHR data for the purposes of research and quality improvement. In this study we have analyzed the completeness with which five main treatment activities are recorded on the ED whiteboards in a Danish healthcare region. We find that the low completeness of the activity data probably prevents most types of reuse and that, if reused, the activity data incur a bias toward the patients with the more severe conditions as indicated by triage level, length of stay, and patient age. The incomplete activity data cannot be explained by the whiteboard being disliked by the ED clinicians or unused for its primary purpose of supporting day-to-day ED work. On the contrary, the whiteboard had been in successful use in the EDs for several years. It is in spite of successful primary use that the incompleteness of the activity data probably prevents most secondary uses. We point to non-mandated use and manual data entry as reasons that contribute to the poor data quality.

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