HASLAM'S VIEW



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Sharing information with patients will improve care

THERE HAVE BEEN ONGOING DEBATES ABOUT MEDICAL RECORDS, AND how opening them up to patients could change them subtly, making doctors less likely to speculate, engendering fear through differential diagnoses, and so on.

It has made records more focused on fact, rather than comment. There could be issues if a previous doctor, in an earlier era, had written things assuming they were never going to be seen by the patient.

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A while ago, I was asked to co-author (along with a representative of a patient organisation) a report for the government on the use of information in healthcare. In the introduction, we wrote:

'The barriers to making the information revolution a reality are much more cultural than they are technological.

'What is needed more than anything is a change of mindset in the NHS, so that it is taken for granted that the provision of information to patients and service users is an integral part of the therapeutic process; that communication matters; that the records about my health are "my records"; that responsibly sharing data is vital for patient safety and continuity of care; .... and, that openness and transparency are vital to building public trust.'

The issue of trust is such an important one. I was really struck by the actions of Dr Amir Hannan, who took over Harold Shipman's practice, and who felt that one of the best ways to engender trust was through offering patients full online access to their general practice records – well before this was something other practices were considering.

As he explained: 'When the patient can see the same information as the clinician, it can foster a more equal relationship and lead to improved care.'

Such a professional and patient centred approach is, of course, absolutely the right way to go. Indeed, towards the end of my career as a frontline GP, I started providing my patients with printouts of their blood test results, along with a guide to what they meant.

Perhaps I had been impressed by the vet who treated my Labrador, and who always did the same. It just struck me as odd that animal patients always seemed to be provided with more information than their human counterparts. The most that humans typically get is 'Your blood test results were fine.'

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Patients have a right now to see their summary care record, at least, and on line access is improving. But have attitudes changed universally? What do you think?

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