Health and Clinical Management — From the Pen and Paper to the Digital Era

Adapting the Healthcare Environment to Take Full Advantage of Information and Communication Technology

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Summary

Objectives: To present some of the recent best papers in the field of health and clinical management.
Methods: Synopsis of the best articles selected for the IMIA Yearbook 2011.
Results: Of the five selected articles, some confirm the benefits of processing standardized data, others demonstrate the value of adapting the healthcare environment with new technological devices to improve patient safety and healthcare professionals' time-efficiency. Other fields are also embraced: the possibilities offered by today's communication technology open doors largely for telemedicine and remote patient monitoring.
Conclusions: In constant evolution, the healthcare environment has multiple challenges to meet: cost containment, increase and ageing of the population, enormous quantities of data and quickly evolving knowledge, complex and multi-disciplinary approaches for healthcare, need for safer care, to mention but a few. While health IT has already helped healthcare in facing these challenges, there is still much more that could be done.

Keywords
Medical informatics, International Medical Informatics Association, yearbook, health and clinical management, patient safety, telemedicine, technology in healthcare

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Introduction

The first medical records were handwritten and narrative, documented retrospectively and only for patients whose case was of greatest value for teaching. Things have evolved since [1] with systematic documentation of a medical record for all patients, normalized forms [e.g. for vital signs], structured medical records. This evolution was driven by the new knowledge that could be built upon the recorded information; the new knowledge leading to adaptation of health care practices which, in turn, are leading to new changes in medical records. Successive iterations of this process finally led to modern large medical records which reflect the huge amount of knowledge and the very complex multi-disciplinary medicine. Adding to this complexity is the necessity to provide efficient care: paper-based medical records and face-to-face communication are not optimal to deal with the increasing amount of data to be monitored, processed and distributed across all the providers acting in the patient care and populations’ health.

As information and communication technologies (ICT) can offer solutions in storing, retrieving and processing data and communication technology can provide solutions in the transfer of information, it has stepped into healthcare a few decades ago [2]. Still, one should not be surprised that it did not yet deliver solutions to all challenges, that not all computing interventions have the desired positive effect [3], nor that sometimes it is perceived as a burden and gives healthcare professionals the feeling of serving ICT instead of ICT serving them [4]. But most will agree, or at least hope, that computers are for healthcare as indispensable as Google is for searches, and as practical as smartphones [5]. One should not forget that medical informatics is, relative to most other medical specialities, a very young discipline [2].

While ICT has entered the healthcare domain because of healthcare’s own evolution, some changes are, in turn, required in healthcare by ICT: medical records have to become electronic, further structured, much information has to be standardized, healthcare processes have to be understood [6], knowledge has to be made “machine understandable”, new devices have to be adopted among many others. All-in-all, the entire healthcare environment is being adapted so that ICT can fully express their potential.

Best Paper Selection

The five papers selected for this yearbook are convincing examples of what can be achieved with today's technologies and tools. Although these cannot give a complete overview of all the challenges faced by medical informatics, they demonstrate promising results in topics such as patient security, time-efficiency improvement, patient triage, healthcare resource management, patient remote monitoring or bio-surveillance.
While all individuals should have the possibility to receive appropriate care, correct and efficient triage of patients is necessary. The triage of patients or cases that should receive specialized care from those not requiring it is one important step in reducing wasting of limited specialized resources’ time. The paper published by Tan et al. [7] demonstrates how tele-dermoscopy can successfully triage patients that do require specialized dermatologic evaluation from those not requiring it and that can be handled by primary care physicians. Further, for those patients clearly needing specialized follow-up, remote monitoring can avoid unnecessary visits. Remote monitoring, coupled to automatic critical events detection, offers healthcare providers the possibility to triage between those patients whose condition is as should be, and thus not requiring a consultation, and those needing attention. This is illustrated in the study by Varma et al. [8] with the evaluation of the impact on the delays for handling critical events and the reduction of patient visits for remotely monitored patients with implanted cardioverter defibrillator; a reduction of patient visits by a half, a drastic improvement in the time between critical event occurrence and consultation and no negative impact on patient morbidity is a demonstration of ICT’s value for healthcare resources management.

In the field of disease surveillance, Leal’s paper [9] on bloodstream infection regional monitoring illustrate the ability to automatically process large amounts of data, provided that data can be digitally available and standardized. Whereas manual identification of cases and chart review are a time consuming task, disease outbreaks and classification can be automatically performed by software with results similar to those obtained by manual review.

Reduction of preventable medical errors is another theme in which ICT is expected to have a significant impact. In the field of medication-related errors. While many studies have been published on CPOE and prescribing issues, the medication administration process has been less studied. Poon et al. [10] show that, with the introduction of a bar-code medication verification technology embedded in an eMAR, transcription of drug orders was made unnecessary, inappropriate timing administration errors were reduced by over 40% and potential adverse drug events were reduced by over 50%. While such a system can prevent early administration, late execution of interventions will more likely be addressed by targeting organisational aspects. Nevertheless, when dealing with time, technology may also play its part. This is illustrated by Ohashi and his colleagues [11] who have evaluated auto-tracking of patient bedside clinical interventions with the use of RFID tags. They have developed a system capable of automatically detecting the presence of patients, healthcare personal and material like iv medication bags, syringes and laboratory specimen tubes. While allowing for security checks (wrong patient / medication / specimen tube), their system showed an important decrease in time needed to perform routine clinical interventions. Their work clearly demonstrates that commonly available technology has a strong potential in reducing workload of health professionals.

Conclusions and Outlook

These excellent papers and their promising results are an encouragement for all to continue investing time, effort and resources to further the adoption of ICT and other technologies in healthcare. Even though a lot has already been achieved, there surely is much more still to be accomplished!

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Table 1  Best paper selection of articles for the IMIA Yearbook of Medical Informatics 2011 in the section ‘Health and Clinical Management’. The articles are listed in alphabetical order of the first author’s surname.

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<th>Section</th>
<th>Health and Clinical Management</th>
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References

The complete papers can be accessed in the Yearbook’s full electronic version, provided that permission has been granted by the copyright holder(s).