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Our Pen-and-Paper Doctors

With electronic health records seen widely as a way to make medical care better and possibly cheaper, it is disturbing how slowly they are being adopted by American physicians. If this country does not accelerate the conversion from paper to modern technologies, many of the gauzy promises of health care reform made by politicians and health planners will become irrelevant.

The bad news about electronic health records was gathered in a survey of 2,700 practicing physicians led by researchers at the Massachusetts General Hospital, with financial support from the federal government and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The results were published online by The New England Journal of Medicine. The study found that **a paltry 4 percent of the doctors had a “fully functional” electronic records system that would allow them to view laboratory data, order prescriptions and help them make clinical decisions, while another 13 percent had more basic systems.**

This is a **startling contrast with other industrialized nations.** A 2006 survey by the Commonwealth Fund found that nearly all doctors in the Netherlands and the vast majority in Australia, New Zealand and Britain were using electronic medical records. Denmark has a comprehensive health information exchange that allows doctors to see all medical care and testing provided to a patient. They can even see whether a patient has filled a prescription, which is information that most American doctors lack.

The chief reasons American doctors cite for not moving into the electronic age is the **high cost of buying and maintaining the equipment, the inability to find a system that met their needs and a concern that a system would quickly become obsolete.** Other industrialized nations have moved faster because of strong national leadership in setting standards and helping to finance adoption.

Electronic records should make medical care safer and better. Doctors who had a fully functional system reported that it improved the quality of their clinical decisions, their communication with other doctors and patients and their delivery of long-term and preventive care. It also helped them avoid medication errors.

President Bush has called for widespread use of electronic health records by 2014, and both presumptive presidential candidates urge greater use of information technologies. Senator Barack Obama is calling for investing \$50 billion over five years to help make the switch.

Computers and information-sharing technologies have increased productivity and cut costs in other industries and are being applied in major medical centers. It is time to drag private physicians out of the paper age.