How to limit clinical errors in interpretation of data

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We all assume that we can understand and correctly interpret what we read. However, interpretation is a collection of subtle processes that are easily influenced by poor presentation or wording of information. This article examines how evidence-based principles of information design can be applied to medical records to enhance clinical understanding and accuracy in interpretation of the detailed data that they contain.

The previous paper showed how careful design can make information within records easier to find. The focus in this paper is on how design can assist correct interpretation and thereby limit clinical errors. Unfortunately, repeated encounters with medical records have desensitised doctors to the poor presentation of information. For example, in one study clinicians considered their records satisfactory even when objective measures, such as speed in retrieving specific details of patients, indicated much room for improvement.

The ease with which written materials can be used to check details or make decisions is strongly influenced by the way the content is visually presented, and in many professional domains errors result from poor information design. Errors in interpretation of words, tables, or graphs result from the cognitive processes of perception, attention, and memory, which operate in similar ways for everyone. So, although some of the evidence we cite comes from studies unrelated to medical care, it applies equally to use of medical records.

Perception, attention, and memory

A familiar example of interpretation difficulties resulting from perception is illegible handwriting or type on computer screens or printouts. These perceptual difficulties can lead to confusion over drug names (for example, Norflex and Norflox). Type is usually more legible than handwriting, but this advantage can be lost if the writer uses too many different fonts, colours, or embellishments such as italics, all capital letters, or underlining. Reading speed increases with letter size up to an optimum, then gradually declines as the letters become larger. The optimum varies with visual acuity, and hence age, but lies between 2 mm and 6 mm for the x-height of the letter (i.e., the height of a letter "x").

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Memory generates distortions as well as omissions. For example, a recent encounter with a patient who has thyrotoxicosis can bias the clinician to overdiagnose this disorder in subsequent underweight patients. Well-designed records that allow clinicians to check whether the disorder has previously been excluded will help reduce the impact of such bias. Differential reliance on long-term memory may underlie the urban/rural difference in record-keeping observed among general practitioners.
practitioners in the Netherlands, where doctors in urban practices found information in their records more easily than did doctors in rural practices. Those in rural practices are probably happier not to record consultations in full detail because they have fewer patients and the population is more static.

**Interpretation of textual data**

*Visual factors*

Records can be structured by means of informative headings, columns, and vertical and horizontal space or lines. Visual structure, discussed in the previous paper, makes data easier to find. It also aids interpretation because record structure provides a context that makes data easier to find. It also aids interpretation. Visual structure, discussed in the previous paper, makes data easier to find as the amount of visual structure increases.

*Clarity of language*

Text entries in medical records must be succinct, but must also avoid ambiguity. The note, “Pain in left knee—not sitting” may be concise and clear to the writer, but to other readers it could mean that the pain disappears when the patient sits or that, because of pain, the patient is not sitting. If, while entering data, writers anticipate the needs of readers, there can be benefits in speed and accuracy for future users, including the original writer.

Ambiguities can also arise with quantifiers such as “sometimes” or “often”, because these convey different meanings to patients and clinicians, with patients tending to attribute higher frequencies. Another example of how wording can generate bias is the “framing effect”, which resembles the shift in perception from judging a glass to be half-full to judging it half-empty. The reality is unchanged, but the different perspective encourages different actions. In a study of researchers given simulated interim results of a clinical trial, the same data were presented to some researchers as treatment failure rates and to others as success rates; the proportion who made the correct decision about whether to stop the trial early was twice as high when the data were presented as failure rates. In terms of medical records, when a progress note reads “The oedema has gone down”, the implied action may be to do nothing further. However, if the note reads “Significant oedema remains”, a change in the treatment may seem appropriate. Although not as succinct, presentation of both perspectives “The oedema has gone down but significant oedema remains” can reduce errors of interpretation.

*Interpretation of numeric data*

Numeric data occur frequently in medical records, so should be segregated in a separate column (figure 1). If there are many numeric data, from multiple investigations or repeated observations, a table or graph will help. Graphs make trends more explicit, and well-designed tables make location of specific data items easier. However, doctors differ in how they define data items such as duration of illness, which may be

**Figure 1: Effect of visual structure on ease of finding and interpretation of data**

The four numerical values (nnn) that appear in each of the examples are easier to find and interpret as more visual structure is introduced into the record.

is shorter than that on the left. In many cases the positive information is also more succinct ("Still smoking" rather than "Has not stopped smoking"). The safest way to use negatives in records is to denote an exception (eg, "Headache; paracetamol not effective").

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Figure 2: Effect on interpretation of dilation rate of choice of scale
Adapted from Cartmill and Thornton.34 The dilation rate appears slower in the right-hand plot, which has a bigger scale on the time axis.

Figure 3: Medical record summary formatted as a time-line for interventions and progress notes
Symbols can be expanded to a report or diagram. Modified and reproduced with permission from Plaisant and colleagues.35
organise information to meet the needs of more than one profession

Visual separators, such as lines or boxes, can distinguish instructions to other professionals, such as clinic nurses, from data.

Make the organisation of the material visually explicit

Vertical space between sections and horizontal indents helps to signal the relation between different parts of a medical record.

Use of computers to aid interpretation

Graphs and tables are easily produced by a computer, especially when data are already in electronic form, such as laboratory-test results. Data can be viewed on-screen as radiographs or battery of lung-function tests, inclusion of a prose interpretation will save future readers’ time in regenerating the original interpretation—or making an incorrect one. The interpretation of data-sets is faster when they are labelled with their message rather than their content. Consider which would be easier for a junior doctor browsing a complex table in the middle of the night—one labelled “White-cell counts during April, 1998” or one labelled “White-cell count has fallen throughout April, 1998”.

Organising medical records

The last paper in this series will examine the advantages and disadvantages of computerisation of medical records. Where does the balance currently lie? Do computer-based records benefit clinicians and patients, or interpose drawbacks and new design demands?

Conclusions

In clinical practice, we need the right data on the right patient at the right time and in the right place. To interpret the data correctly, however, we also need the data in the right format and language. The format and language depend partly on how clinicians enter data in the record and partly on how documents such as laboratory reports are designed. Improved record design will enable faster searches and more accurate interpretation, thereby improving outcomes for patients and reducing the costs of health care. Although the importance of many of the design factors we have discussed in this paper has been known for a long time, these factors seem to have had little influence on medical-record format and language. Panel 2 summarises six principles of information design that can enhance data interpretation. Fuller discussion of how these and other principles can enhance medical communication are available.

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1542

The Lancet • November 7, 1998


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