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The Unavailability of Prenatal Records at Hospital Presentation

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Objectives: To determine the unavailability of prenatal records at the time of patient presentation to a community hospital's labor and delivery unit, to document the age of the information in those records that are available, and to investigate the efforts made to retrieve missing records.

Method: A survey form was completed by labor and delivery nursing staff over a 3-month period for each patient presenting for care.

Results: Prenatal records were unavailable 37% of the time at initial presentation ($n = 536$). Records were never obtained for 20% of the patient presentations. The median age of the prenatal record as determined by the patient's last recorded visit was 30 ± 31 days (0-207) for those records that were immediately available at the time of presentation ($n = 273$), and the median age was 5 ± 19 days (0-127) for those records that were retrieved after the patient presented ($n = 67$). When the prenatal record was not immediately available and was subsequently retrieved ($n = 83$), it took a median of 1.4 ± 12.1 hours (0.25-80) to obtain the record. For those records that were retrieved ($n = 89$), nine (10%) were delivered by office staff, 23 (26%) were retrieved personally by the prenatal care provider, and 57 (64%) of the records were obtained by facsimile transmission.

Conclusion: Prenatal records are frequently unavailable when a patient presents for care, and even when the records are available, the information contained within them is likely to be outdated. These conditions may create significant risk for the patient and certainly increase the cost of medical care. Better methods of making up to date prenatal records accessible are needed.

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