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The authors expect that with careful documentation and reporting, more species of fish will be found to cause scombroid poisoning.

**References**

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# Physicians' Impressions of Old Medical Records

Roman M. Hendrickson, MD, and Jamie Lee, RN  
 Ormond Beach, Florida

Old medical records are considered essential to high-quality medical care.<sup>1,2</sup> It has been assumed that the essential data of a patient's previous medical care could be found in records obtained from prior physicians. Are old medical records, when obtained from previous health care providers, useful, and if so, which portions are most useful to the requesting physician?

To answer these questions, the Research Committee of the Florida Academy of Family Physicians conducted a study of the perceptions and preferences of its members in obtaining old medical records.

**Methods**

A questionnaire was designed asking the members of the Florida academy to indicate the usefulness of each of several designated types of old medical records obtained from previous health care providers. Specifically physicians were asked to rate on a scale of one to seven (one being most useful and seven being least useful) each type of old medical record available, including progress notes and chart notes, previous laboratory tests such as complete blood count, chemistry survey, etc, electrocardiograms (ECGs), chest or other x-ray reports, hospital discharge summaries, dictated summaries of medical history, and other special tests such as cardiac catheterizations, stress tests, mammograms, pulmonary studies, and others. The questionnaire, along with a self-addressed, but unstamped, return envelope, was mailed in the spring of 1982 to approximately 1,100 members of the Florida Academy of Family Physicians.

From the Research Committee, Florida Academy of Family Physicians, Jacksonville, Florida. Requests for reprints should be addressed to Dr. Roman M. Hendrickson, 621 South Nova Road, Ormond Beach, FL 32074.

**Results**

Of the 1,100 questionnaires mailed in the spring of 1982, 421 completed questionnaires were returned by September 1982.

Table 1 reflects the averaged responses of physicians to the seven questions found on the questionnaire utilized in this study. It reflects the overall dissatisfaction of physicians with the "value" of old chart notes or progress notes on patients. Written-in comments from individual respondents included such representative remarks as "most progress notes are handwritten and mostly illegible," "progress notes contain little information of enduring value," and "I never read progress notes from other doctors." The vast majority of physicians do not feel it worthwhile to obtain old progress notes or chart notes. Although the majority of physicians felt that previous laboratory tests were of some value in assessing the patient's current status, there was a divergence of opinion. The physicians appeared to want the old ECGs on patients transferring to their practice; the value of having ECGs for comparison with subsequent ECGs was specifically mentioned by several physicians. It had been assumed that old x-ray reports would be of universally agreed upon value. Although a slight majority of respondents indicated they felt x-ray reports to be valuable, the margin was quite slim. Hospital discharge summaries were universally considered to be of great value in assessing and documenting a patient's past medical history. Respondents overwhelmingly indicated the value of obtaining a dictated summary of the patient's medical history, if it was available; few physicians disagreed with its value in assessing the past medical history of a transfer patient. Only a modest majority of physicians indicated the value of obtaining special test reports, such as cardiac catheterization reports, stress test results, and mammogram reports.

**Summary**

The physician respondents generally agreed that progress notes and chart notes are of little value to them and that hospital discharge summaries, old ECGs, and dictated summaries of the patient's medical records were of greater value.

**Table 1. Averaged Responses of Physicians to a Questionnaire Eliciting Satisfaction With Old Medical Records**

Medical Record	Score*
Dictated medical history summaries	2.21
Hospital discharge summaries	2.33
Electrocardiograms	3.58
Other special test reports	3.79
Laboratory tests	3.81
X-ray reports	3.83
Progress notes	4.93

\*Based on a rating of 1 to 7, with 1 = most useful and 7 = least useful

Although a majority of respondents felt old x-ray reports, results of old laboratory tests, and reports of special tests, such as cardiac catheterizations, pulmonary functions, and stress tests, to be of value, opinion was more nearly equally divided. In general, physicians valued old records that were typewritten over handwritten records.

**Conclusions**

Most respondents felt obtaining patients' old records was valuable to them. Only those records that were typewritten and summarized, in addition to ECGs and test reports, were agreed upon as universally desirable. The need for a standard old medical records summary in a legible format was manifested. In response to this need, the Research Committee, utilizing data from this project, designed such a summary form that might be completed by the office nurse or physician from whom old medical records were obtained.

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