

Death and Data—Where Basic Medical Record Keeping Saves Lives

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Doctors and nurses get to witness firsthand how their interventions can save or lose a life. People who work for payers, like medical directors, may get a charge out of covering treatments for chronic conditions or lifesaving treatments. But for those who work in data entry and records collections, finding how they directly impact patients and their care can require some research.

Public health officials outside of the United States, however, see the clear link, and would be overjoyed to have access to the kinds of data collected in American facilities. According to a report published by Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health's online global health news and information forum Global Health NOW, accurate birth and death records—which are critical in identifying causes of death and disease—are hard to come by.¹

In May, officials from the Data for Health Initiative, which is backed by Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Australian government, presented lessons learned from a \$100 million four-year initiative studying the impact of improved death certificate collection in 20 countries.

A major development came from Tanzania, where health officials in one district learned through improved data collection that many more malaria-related deaths of children were happening beyond the walls of hospitals than previously assumed. Armed with this new information, local officials “changed the first-line antimalarial drugs used, shifted funds to address malaria and increased prevention outreach to households and communities, resulting in reductions in malaria deaths,” according to the report.

“The machinery of data production harnessed to data use and impact creates a virtuous cycle of data use and demand,” says Dr. Philip Setel, leader of the Civil Registration and Vital Statistics work under the Bloomberg Data for Health Initiative.

It will take many more years and millions of dollars to create adequate record keeping systems in the countries that most need it. But American health information management professionals can rest slightly easier knowing they are a part of a “virtuous cycle of data use and demand.”

Note

1. Simpson, Brian and Dayna Kerecman Myers. “The Lifesaving Power of Data.” Global Health NOW. May 9, 2018. www.globalhealthnow.org/2018-05/lifesaving-power-data.

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