

Impact of the 21st Century Cures Act on Patients and the Healthcare Team

Virginia Marie Simmons, MPH, Tiffany Boman, RN, OCN®, and Shannon A. Stewart, RN, BSN



The 21st Century Cures Act is designed to make healthcare information more accessible and transparent to patients and the healthcare team. The provisions to address information blocking dictate that health information such as clinical notes, laboratory test results, and imaging reports in an electronic health record must be immediately available to patients through a secure online portal. Implementation of the 21st Century Cures Act mandate has presented challenges and benefits for patients and the healthcare team. Challenges can be addressed through awareness, continued support for patients and the healthcare care team, and by sharing experiences.

AT A GLANCE

- Having access to healthcare information empowers patients and increases their trust in the healthcare team.
- Patients can be encouraged to take advantage of the benefits of health information technology (e.g., patient portals).
- Patients should be informed about the release timing of results and the importance of follow-up visits to review and discuss information.

KEYWORDS

Cures Act; information blocking; open notes; electronic health information

DIGITAL OBJECT IDENTIFIER

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The 21st Century Cures Act (Cures Act) was signed into law in 2016, in part to promote interoperability of health information technology (health IT) and reduce information blocking (HealthIT.gov, 2023a). This was not the first legislation introduced by the U.S. Congress targeting interoperability and the reduction of information blocking to provide increased access to electronic health information (EHI) for healthcare providers and patients (HealthIT.gov, 2023c). *Interoperability* can be understood as the appropriate control, accessibility, and exchange of health IT and EHI (HealthIT.gov, 2023b). *Information blocking* refers to intentional or inadvertent interference with the electronic exchange of health information in an unreasonable manner (HealthIT.gov, 2023b).

Implementation of the Cures Act began in 2020, and healthcare providers, health IT developers, and health information networks have had to adjust appropriately to integrate the phases of requirements (HealthIT.gov, 2023b). By federal mandate, the Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT (ONC) has led the charge in developing strategic plans for implementation by coordinating health IT processes and promoting the electronic exchange of health information (HealthIT.gov, 2022; ONC, 2015). The ONC has shaped the evolution of EHI's definition and has defined what is considered information blocking since the implementation of the Cures Act (HealthIT.gov, 2022). In adjusting to meet requirements as set by the ONC, several challenges and benefits have been noted to affect healthcare providers and patients. Understanding the Cures Act and educating patients and families is an important aspect of the nurse's role as a patient advocate.

Implications

Health IT and EHI

Uses of health IT include patient care responsibilities for healthcare providers, engagement with health systems and personal health information for patients, and research and population health management for researchers and public health professionals and organizations (HealthIT.gov, 2022; ONC, 2015). The promotion of interoperability, led by the ONC and informed by the Cures Act, aims to provide and protect the exchange of health IT for purposes such as these. Health IT is used by healthcare providers in multiple ways, including to manage patient information, inform treatment decisions, and allow for easier collaboration across the various healthcare providers that patients may see (HealthIT.gov, 2022). It also provides a greater