

Pioneering in the Control of Medical-Clinical Case Records

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SEPTEMBER 7, 1960, was a memorable day for the Illinois Department of Public Welfare and the State Records Commission. On that day a records disposal schedule for medical-clinical records was approved and signed. Working together, the representatives of the Department and the Commission had taken a tremendous stride toward progress and modernization. The improved control of medical-clinical case records in Illinois may well influence records practices in other States as well as in private hospitals, clinics, and medical offices. The Director, administrative staff, and medical officers of the Welfare Department have had the foresight and courage to take a difficult step. Medical-clinical case records play an important part in all phases of the care and treatment of the sick: in private practice, private and public hospitals, and other institutions. Such records are rightly considered confidential, yet for legal and medical purposes they must be preserved for a considerable time. Their overall volume, however, is tremendous, and the cost of maintaining them indefinitely is prohibitive.

The State of Illinois was not alone in its lack of a definite plan for the disposition of medical-clinical case records. The nationwide trend has been to microfilm the entire contents of case folders and then destroy the original documents. Microfilm, however, is of value *only* when there is a high reference demand for the material involved or when the material has permanent historical, research, or legal significance. Since space in mental institutions is at a premium, it was necessary to find ways both to save space and money and to preserve material for the historian, researcher, and members of the legal profession.

For a two-year period the staff of the Department of Welfare and the methods and procedures advisor worked severally and jointly in consulting with Illinois State agencies, those of other States, private organizations such as medical and psychiatric societies and

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universities, and individual physicians. The consensus was that all legal, historical, and research purposes would be adequately served by the physical retention of the case records for a period of 25 years after termination of services to the individual. Although no demonstrable purpose had been served by the indefinite retention of the case histories, no one to date had had the fortitude to dispose of them.

Similarly, in another problem area—the storage and retention of X-ray films—the Department of Welfare encountered misgivings that destruction might lead to future trouble. Besides keeping the preadmission X-rays for 47,922 patients, those for routine checkups, and films showing injuries and other complications, the Department has kept preemployment and twice-yearly checkup X-rays for all of its nearly 15,000 employees. Since only a fraction of these plates have been destroyed, the number on hand still poses a problem. All the authorities consulted were in agreement on the need for recommended X-ray film retention periods, although no specific action had been taken prior to this time.

In January 1953 Otto L. Bettag, M.D., was appointed by Gov. William G. Stratton as Director of the Department of Public Welfare. He was the first physician to serve a full term as Director of the Department, and he has been reappointed in each succeeding biennium. As a member of the Department's Advisory Committee on Chest Diseases for more than 18 years, he has been instrumental in developing its institutional tuberculosis control program, which has gained international recognition. In 1949 he was appointed tuberculosis control officer for the city of Chicago and medical director of its Municipal Tuberculosis Sanatorium.¹

Dr. Bettag encouraged and gave full support to an improved medical-clinical records control program. After many meetings the writer, in her capacity of methods and procedures advisor, was asked to prepare a records disposition schedule for consideration of the State Records Commission. The advisor has a triple responsibility in the Department of Public Welfare: evaluation and selection of material of archival value worthy of preservation in the State Archives; evaluation of nonessential records for shorter retention periods and eventual disposal; and making recommendations for creation and control of records in the future. Theodore J. Casady, Assistant State Archivist of Illinois, who was interested in obtaining documentation of Welfare Department activities for the Archives, was sympathetic toward the problems in respect to records

¹ *Illinois Blue Book*, 1959-60, p. 674.

on hand. He had many discussions with the writer and in general was in agreement with the recommendations suggested. Accordingly, the following schedule was prepared:

1. *Definition.* A medical-clinical case record is defined as that official record of the Department of Public Welfare maintained at a Department facility, which contains a compilation of legal, identifying social and medical information, concerning an individual who is now or has been a patient of the Department of Public Welfare.

Recommendation: Retain medical-clinical case records of former patients for 25 years after separation (death, unauthorized absence, or discharge) and then destroy, provided that if any medical-clinical case file indicates probability of future legal action, or in the event such action has occurred, these files are to be permanently retained. Any medical-clinical case record considered to be unique as to medical findings may be so designated and retained indefinitely. [Authority was also granted for the weeding of nonessential items (of 15 types) from the folders on a continuous basis.]

2. *Microfilmed Medical-Clinical Records.* It is realized that a number of institutions and divisions have microfilmed retired medical-clinical records up to dates within several years of the present time and then destroyed the original records in accordance with authority previously granted by the State Records Commission. In such cases, the 25-year retention period shall apply; but such records will be a combination of microfilm and records in their original state. In institutions that have been granted authority for destruction of case folders subsequent to microfilming in which the material has not yet been destroyed, the physical records are to be retained for the 25-year period and the microfilm records are to be transferred to the State of Illinois Archives. Excepted from this are institutions where microfilm has a large amount of reference use.

3. *X-ray Film With Normal Findings.*

a. *On Books Population* (47,922 patients). Retain all films with normal findings 5 years in their original state, then sell or destroy. In all cases where there is legal action or probability thereof, films are to be retained permanently.

b. *Former Patients* (deceased or otherwise separated). Retain film for 2 years after death, unauthorized absence or discharge, then sell as salvage. In all cases where legal action is pending, films are to be retained permanently.

c. *Employees* (approximately 15,000). Retain film for 2 years after separation from service, then destroy or sell as salvage, retaining preemployment film as long as employee remains in service. In all cases where there is legal action pending, films are to be retained permanently.

d. *Former Employees* (deceased or otherwise separated). Retain film for 2 years after separation from service, then destroy or sell as salvage. Film of all cases in which suit is pending or where death has occurred in line of duty are to be retained permanently.

4. *X-ray of Abnormal Findings.* A retention schedule for X-ray films with abnormal findings is now under consideration. Until such time as a decision is reached, these films shall be held.

The Department of Public Welfare has microfilmed case records from 1900 to 1952 in about half of the 26 institutions. This microfilm is to be forwarded to the Archives in accordance with the schedule, and reference service for all the material is to be provided by the Archives. In addition, 30,000 child welfare case folders will be sent to the State of Illinois Records Center, where a study will be made to determine the amount of reference to them. The Department of Public Welfare has no legal responsibility to provide information to individuals concerned. There is, however, a moral obligation, and disposal schedules for these histories will be based upon the number of reference demands for vital statistics.

The following items from the various institutions have been accepted for retention by the Archives Division of the State of Illinois: admission and discharge registers (1865-1930), admission and medical registers (1898-1900), photographic plates (1912-14), death and discharge registers (1916-38), Department summaries (1931-35), letter books (1868-94), and records of former administrators of the Institute for Juvenile Research. The administrative records and microfilm, together with the medical-clinical case folders from 1934, to be physically retained in the institutions for 25 years, will provide and make readily available information covering an 82-year period. Together with current case records of individuals in the upper age brackets who are still in mental institutions, these records document the activities of the Department for about a hundred years. The historian and the legal expert will have on hand sufficient information for any needed project.

For many years the interested institutions have depended upon legislative action for authority to dispose of certain vital records when the volume became too great and the space was needed. Pending such action, however, they have resorted to tying records in bundles and storing them in attics and basements. Since the writer has been associated with the Welfare Department (for 10 months as records analyst of the Records Management Division of Illinois and for 11 months as advisor in the Department of Public Welfare), much progress has been made in solving complex records problems. The Records Commission has approved schedules for the retention and disposal of the Department's administrative, general office, and institutional records. Authorization for immediate disposal of 7,000 cubic feet of records was obtained, and there is a projected program of disposal of 1,000 cubic feet each year. At a cost of \$20 per square foot of space and approximately \$100 per file cabinet (an average between the lower cost of space and equipment in the older institutions and the much higher cost in the new ones),

considerable savings in both space and equipment have been made; and sorely needed space has been released for other uses. Because of hitherto inadequate methods of filing medical-clinical case records at institutions it is difficult to estimate savings to the institutions resulting from the disposal program. Also, the revenue to be gained by the reclaiming of silver from X-ray films cannot yet be determined, since the total accumulation of films is unknown. Before disposal, the volume of medical-clinical case records and X-ray film is to be measured by each institution, and accurate statistics can then be compiled.

It is believed that in Illinois a path has been cleared that others may follow. It is hoped that this account will encourage others to attack more vigorously this particular problem of records management, tailoring the recommendations to suit their respective needs.

Methodical, Business-Like, and Artistic

Strictly speaking, no *division of correspondence, records, and accounts* exists, but it would be in accordance with a methodical and business-like distribution of labor and responsibility if such a division were created. The miscellaneous work of the Department which should be embraced in this division comprises the keeping of its financial, printing, and stationery accounts; correspondence with farmers' clubs, and the keeping of a correct record of these clubs; foreign correspondence, and correspondence relative to the purchase of seeds; correspondence relative to applications for seeds, reports, and information of a special character; copying letters and manuscripts; &c. The correspondence of the Department is of the greatest importance. It should be well done, and, that this result may be attained, careful, intelligent, and conscientious supervision is absolutely necessary. Especially is it requisite that letters of inquiry concerning methods of culture, the improvement of crops, the introduction of new seeds and plants, drainage, the reclamation of waste lands, insect ravages, and other subjects of importance to the writers and having relation to agriculture, should be promptly, clearly, and fully answered, and in an artistic manner. The Department should be an intelligence-office for all farmers, and it should have intelligent clerks to communicate what it knows.

—James M. Swank, *The Department of Agriculture; Its History and Objects*, p. 63 (Washington, 1872).