What are patient charts and data categories?

The patient chart is a detailed and comprehensive record of the patient’s current status and past medical history. The chart includes many different categories of data including laboratory values, vital signs, notes, imaging results, medication records, and a whole lot more, all being updated continuously by different allied health workers. Each type of data may have its own “tab” like a web browser. The data categories may differ based on which EHR you are using.

The data available in each of the tabs is categorized as structured or unstructured data.

Structured data is information that can be stored and displayed in a consistent, organized manner, such as numerical or categorical values. For example: height, weight, blood pressure, blood type, stage of a disease, etc. This type of data can be validated against expected or biologically plausible ranges and easily analyzed over time. They are all values, either words, phrases or numerical values, that can be selected from pre-defined lists, used to sort or filter patient lists, and easily searched.

Structured data powers dashboards, graphs or other visual representations of data sets for one patient, across a specific set of patients, or across all patients. Structured data helps to drive EHR automation and dashboards, supporting clinical decision-making and facilitating data-driven research.

Unstructured data is typically more descriptive data that can tell a narrative or summative patient story and can be particularly useful during transitions of care. For example: physician notes, radiology images or reports, and faxed copies of structured data that are scanned into the EHR. Unstructured data is more challenging to summarize, show trends, or review for patterns over time. Usually, it needs to be manually analyzed and interpreted. Unstructured data is essential for clinicians to document their interpretation of structured data and communicate with one-another.

Advantages of data categories

- Data categories make it easier to find and view data.
- The data is categorized in a way that will make sense to you and support your workflow.
- If your EHR has the chart search feature, you can use it to find what you are looking for, just like a search engine.
Tips

Choose to enter information as **structured**, rather than unstructured, data.

Be aware that data in the EHR may not always be organized clearly into these categories. An example of this for pre-rounding is notes from an overnight covering team. These are critical to your data collection in the morning but often live within a specific sign out tool, or even written on paper, rather than in the Notes area. It’s important to identify these “**hidden** areas” of the EHR where these less clearly defined pieces of data live.

If you find yourself searching for information for a **long time** but not finding it, consider the fact that it might not be entered into the EHR and it may be easier to **go outside the EHR** and ask someone for the information, like the overnight nurse, a family, or the patient.

**Verify information** that you see in charts with the patient, against other EHR data, or with other care staff to ensure it is up to **date and accurate**. Sometimes when data is cut-and-pasted from prior notes in the EHR, inaccurate information can be introduced or perpetuated.

Perform good chart “hygiene” by **cleaning up** or correcting **inaccurate data**.