NEW RESEARCH CONTINUES QUEST TO IMPROVE DOCUMENTATION

2021 grant recipient to study the effectiveness of virtual education on AT documentation strategies

By Claire Williams

D oumentation is not a new responsibility for athletic trainers, and while it’s one of the more critical parts of quality patient care and AT liability, it’s a skill that many ATs have found elusive, said Sara Nottingham, EdD, LAT, ATC, who has researched documentation over the past six years. Her research has revealed that athletic trainers are looking for more resources, strategies and guidance to better incorporate documentation into their daily practice.

Ready to conduct more applied research with these findings in hand, Nottingham was awarded the 2021 Professional Research Grant in the general category by the NATA Research & Education Foundation to evaluate the effectiveness of a virtual education module to improve documentation.

The project, “Evaluating the Effectiveness of a Personalized Educational Intervention to Improve Athletic Trainers’ Knowledge of Clinical Documentation,” is supported by $28,464 in funding and will test a custom education module to identify if this type of resource impacts ATs’ documentation routine.

“Clinical documentation is an essential skill for athletic trainers, and quality documentation is important for the effective delivery of patient care and characterization of the profession,” Nottingham said.

“Despite its importance, many ATs face challenges with documentation, including lack of knowledge about what and how to document. We hope this educational module provides an effective, accessible and user-friendly resource for athletic trainers looking to improve their clinical documentation.”

Over the past six years, Nottingham, along with her research team Cailee Welch Bacon, PhD, ATC, and Tricia Kasamatsu, PhD, ATC, who will assist in the grant project, was focused on learning what athletic trainers are doing in regards to documentation, what strategies work, what challenges exist and what ATs still need.

Now, they’ve collected a “good body of information and understanding,” Nottingham said, on what’s working well currently and where athletic trainers indicated they needed to improve.

“A big thing people want are more guidelines and resources,” she said. “People recognize that documentation is important, but a lot of times they don’t know what exactly they’re supposed to document or strategies for fitting that into their day.”

When building the module that will be at the center of Nottingham’s research, she considered the team’s previous research data that showed athletic trainers were feeling overwhelmed with where and how to start improving their documentation routines.

She was inspired by this data to enlist practicing clinicians with successful documentation strategies to offer their guidance as part of the education module. While the module also includes PowerPoint content as part of the courses, it features videos of clinicians discussing their own documentation routines as recommendations to participants.

“It’s clinicians speaking to clinicians about why it’s important and how they do it,” Nottingham said. “The concrete strategies they share were really important.”

The module was designed as a resource to strengthen a foundation of professional practice that’s already required of all athletic trainers. So, although the target audience of the research might be more centered on entry-level athletic trainers, Nottingham hasn’t found data that suggests documentation challenges are specific to only the newly certified.

“We know a lot of things have changed with documentation,” she said. “People who have been practicing for 10, 20 years are looking for these resources, too. It does not seem to be specific to career level.

“If anything, it seems like people who have been practicing longer desire more resources because they maybe didn’t learn it as a professional athletic training student, and expectations have changed over time.”

The addition of technology has impacted how documentation is recorded and stored. Previous research conducted by Nottingham, Welch Bacon and Kasamatsu also found that technology has become a major strategy that ATs use to document more efficiently and effectively. Their article, ‘Aspects of Technology That Influence Athletic Trainers’ Current Patient Care Documentation Strategies in the Secondary School,’ was published in the Journal of Athletic Training.

The Fall Sports Medicine Legal Digest features an article about documentation as a defense in potential lawsuits. Proper, clear documentation can be critical in legal disputes in which an athletic trainer may be asked to defend patient care or treatment. Read the latest edition online at www.nata.org/news-publications/publications/sports-medicine-legal-digest.

For example, the thoroughness that electronic medical records (EMR) programs provide through templates, Nottingham said, has increased documentation efficiency and accuracy. The ability to document for the same patients across different devices using a cloud-based system has also helped with accessibility and efficiency, according to Nottingham’s research.

Because Nottingham was awarded the 2021 Professional Research Grant, the formal project and module testing will begin in the first half of 2022.

The research team will recruit practicing athletic trainers to participate in the module, working with control and test groups to complete the lessons and tracking their perception of the content and documentation.

The study will wrap up by the end of summer 2022, then Nottingham, Welch Bacon and Kasamatsu will organize and analyze the data and prepare to publish their results in 2023 or 2024.

Because documentation is such a critical part of athletic trainers’ roles as health care providers, Nottingham sees and appreciates the value of collaborating with practicing clinicians to improve the profession.

“Practicing clinicians are a very valuable part of the research process,” she said. “We couldn’t do this research without practicing athletic trainers – it’s been a valuable collaboration with practicing clinicians to not only learn what they’re doing, but it’s allowed us to shape what we’re doing moving forward.”

For more information about Nottingham’s research and the professional research grant, as well as other NATA Foundation grant recipients, visit www.natafoundation.org/research/grant-opportunities.

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