**Contact:** James Vrac, CAE

301-718-6523

jvrac@paimgmt.com

# Improved Diagnosis and Electronic Health Record Recording of Delirium

# Can Improve Patient Outcomes

Bethesda, MD—Delirium is preventable and treatable when diagnosed, but the diagnosis is often missed. “However, despite the importance of early diagnosis, delirium is typically underdiagnosed and underreported,” said Dr. Thomas H. McCoy, Jr., Director of Research, Center for Quantitative Health, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, and lead author of “Enhancing Delirium Case Definitions in Electronic Health Records Using Clinical Free Text,” published in *Psychosomatics*, the Journal of the Academy of Psychosomatic Medicine.

Delirium is a state of acute confusion, associated with morbidity and mortality in diverse medically ill populations. It is characterized by fluctuations in mental status, impaired attention, and a decline in cognitive function. Delirium is associated with more frequent falls, increased length of hospital stays, and institutionalization after discharge. “Despite the importance of the diagnosis, delirium is less frequently documented in medical records than we would expect,” said Dr. McCoy.

The authors note that the lower than expected delirium case rate likely reflects a combination of failure to diagnose and code. Using the electronic health records (EHR) of two large New England academic medical centers, they calculated and compared the rate of diagnosis of delirium. They noted that EHR data have previously been shown to enhance detection over administrative claims data, and the text of clinical documentation helped develop more comprehensive delirium definitions. “Our thought was that the inclusion of additional data sources could help identify cases which are recognized but not coded,” said Dr. McCoy.

Previous studies, for example, show that delirium is highly prevalent, occurring in up to 30% of admissions to general hospitals and in up to 80% of intensive care unit patients, and in 60% of elderly patients. The overall delirium rate in this study ranged from 2.0–5.4% of 809,512 admissions identified. The authors further observed that the identified rate of delirium increased between 2005 and 2013. By the final year of the study, one of the two sites reported delirium in 7.0% of cases, of which almost half were documented but not coded.

“That the rate of delirium observed in our study was far lower than most literature estimates suggests that further work on identification, documentation, diagnosis, and algorithmic case definitions is required,” concluded Dr. McCoy.

The Academy of Psychosomatic Medicine, a professional society of more than 1,200 leading physicians, represents psychiatrists dedicated to the advancement of medical science, education, and health care for persons with co-morbid psychiatric and general medical conditions.

# # #