

NEWS

Electronic health record alerts for physicians boost autism study enrollment

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An algorithm that scans electronic health records and alerts doctors to a patient's eligibility for SPARK, a large genetic study of autism, led to a **fourfold increase in enrollment** in the project, according to the lead investigator of a new study. The likelihood of enrollment was particularly elevated among **Black and Asian people**, a companion study shows.

SPARK aims to recruit 50,000 autistic people and their families in an effort to learn more about the genetic factors underlying the condition. It is a multi-site project based in the United States and funded by the Simons Foundation, *Spectrum's* parent organization.

SPARK researchers at Texas Children's Hospital in Houston built a Best Practice Alert, or BPA, for the hospital's electronic health record system. The tool scans a person's electronic medical record during a clinic visit and alerts their physician if they are eligible to enroll in SPARK.

The alert pops up only for people with an autism diagnosis who aren't already enrolled in the study, and it briefly explains the study's purpose and highlights the requirements to participate, including consent forms and a saliva sample. A physician can either dismiss it or tell the person about the alert and record whether they're interested.

The SPARK alert popped up 3,634 times from September 2018 to September 2019, the researchers found. And after seeing the alert, physicians told their patients about SPARK 52 percent of the time.

Of the alerted patients, 64 percent said that they were interested in enrolling, whereas 34 percent

declined further contact.

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