

Article and Quiz for the Public*

A Consumer Watch on Health Information Exchange

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How much would you say the average consumer knew about the electronic health record (EHR)—medical records in paperless form—five years ago? That point in time is significant because it marks the president’s announcement of a directive for an EHR for Americans by 2014. Today, the public knows more about EHRs through media reports and from witnessing physicians dispensing with the pen and documenting treatment at the keyboard.

How much do you think consumers knew back then about health information exchange (HIE)—sharing health information over the wire? Familiarity with the airlines or banking industries moving information electronically was likely to be more common than the same concept in healthcare. Today, it is not unusual to hear consumers mention how great it will be when information is captured only once during a medical visit and when medical records can arrive quickly at another physician’s office.

These goals are closer today due to a formidable catalyst. The Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology, with strong backing by the Department of Health and Human Services, filled such a significant role that the office was made permanent in the federal economic stimulus law passed in February. It is clear the top economic stimulus goals cannot be met without formidable participation by the healthcare sector. While the direction is clear, all the hurdles have not been scaled.

Healthcare stakeholders have been working hard to make progress as the clock ticks. Many have participated in difficult initiatives with a teamwork style that is unprecedented in the healthcare world. Public and private groups who stepped up to the initial voluntary challenges continue now under more prescriptive laws to meet the economic stimulus goals, never losing sight of the untold value and efficiencies that will result.

Right now, healthcare entities, such as hospitals, treatment centers, and physician offices, are operating with varying levels of paper and electronic records. “Hybrid” is a word commonly used to label healthcare entities who keep both systems going, which is a complex way to operate.

However, when information becomes electronic, its sequenced flow may change. Special staff skills are required for the same job when paper records are discontinued. When technology changes, policies and procedures must be revamped and staff must be trained. These positive and necessary changes can nevertheless interrupt day-to-day operations. A facility’s staff must remain engaged to its mission of high quality care while technology is updated. Each facility and health system is surveying the industry landscape, the federal expectations, the budget restrictions, and the need for an adequate, qualified workforce. They are also making ongoing decisions for next steps to increase their degree of electronic operations.

Someday health information will easily follow a consumer from point to point in the care delivery system. As healthcare consumers, we can follow the momentum and join the participants when our local healthcare facilities offer consumers opportunities to participate.

November 1–7, 2009 is Health Information and Technology (HI&T) Week. During the week, the progress and benefits of health information and technology working together will be celebrated. Each year this celebration brings the healthcare industry further along in health reform and closer to ongoing patient care operations benefitting from timely, accurate, and protected health information.

Quiz:

Test your understanding of the national progression from paper medical records to electronic health information.

1. True or False: The US goal of national healthcare is to have an electronic health record for Americans by 2014.
2. True or False: The new economic stimulus law progresses the healthcare industry with more prescribed direction toward enhanced use of technology with health information.
3. True or False: Many healthcare stakeholders have worked together for five years to improve healthcare quality and delivery systems by using technology and health information synergistically.
4. When health information becomes electronic, which of the following may be necessary in healthcare operations to make the transition?
 - a. Staff may require new training
 - b. The flow of information may change
 - c. Policies and procedures should be revamped
 - d. All of these
5. True or False: The change from paper to electronic records within healthcare entities is complex, as manual and electronic systems operate together as a hybrid.

Answers: 1. True, 2. True, 3. True, 4. d, 5. True