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Eight Essentials for Electronic Medical Records Achieving Full Potential

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06.17.2009

The Federal government's vast economic stimulus package is not only designed to spur the nation's economy, it also intends to help remake a number of key segments of society, the most important of which is healthcare. Among President Obama's paradigm shifting initiatives for healthcare is stimulus funding for electronic medical records (EMR).

Technology dominates virtually every aspect of healthcare today except the lowly patient medical record. Doctors by the millions continue to take notes by hand and the majority of hospitals continue to rely on paper records. The penetration of EMR within healthcare is estimated at less than 10 percent.

Industry observers are largely in agreement over the potential benefits of electronic medical records to reduce costs and enhance the quality of care. When patient information is digitized and searchable, it is readily available for review and analysis. It is intuitive in our society that whenever we automate anything – from manufacturing operations to retail transactions – costs go down and efficiency and quality go up. By one estimate, electronic medical records, if adopted universally, could generate more than $30 billion in annual savings.

Electronic medical records do hold tremendous potential, but the emphasis should be on the word "potential." While the movement to convert patient records to computers is gaining momentum, there is no guarantee of success. In fact, the head-long movement spurred by billions of stimulus dollars could prove counterproductive unless the industry takes a pause to address eight essentials to EMR success:

Set realistic expectations – Unfortunately, there is no single cure for the ills of our nation's healthcare system. The issues are complex and implementing a change in one area can have ripple effects in unforeseen and unintended ways. It is essential that we set realistic expectations for EMR, which is a powerful part of the solution, but only one part. We should recognize that the success of EMR depends on systemic changes throughout the healthcare technology infrastructure.

Provide financial support – The Federal government has recognized that EMR will not happen without a financial incentive for physicians and hospitals. Physician reimbursements have fallen during recent years, forcing doctors to see more patients each day while also reducing the ability to invest in practice administration that lacks a direct pay back. This financial pressure is on top of substantial debt that practices are carrying for medical education and equipment. The stimulus package offers up to $64,000 over six years for records conversion, which has already proven successful in making EMR a top priority, if not by doctors then certainly within the healthcare information technology community that is rapidly developing new products and services.

Set universal EMR standards – Success with the national deployment of EMR will rely on creation of high standards for technology application and user interfaces. There are numerous precedents in this regard with information technology companies working through groups such as CORE to establish widely accepted parameters. EMR is in desperate need of such standards to assure quality and interconnectivity; otherwise, we will have a world of disparate, low-functioning systems, none of which can talk to each other or to third parties such as healthcare plans. Standards are essential to establishing benchmarks for functionality, security and interfaces.

Provide physician input/advocacy/training – Numerous op-ed pieces have been published recently from physicians who object to EMR because they feel it will reduce their ability to connect with patients in the clinical setting. Unless physicians provide input into the design of these systems, EMR is doomed to failure because doctors and their support staffs will not modify workflow to accommodate the new technology. In the worst case, EMR could add costs if the fundamental approach to office practice is not changed. (I was in a doctor's office recently where the physician continues to write prescriptions by hand and a medical assistant makes photocopies for the patient's paper medical record and then enters the information into the computer. A truly integrated system would have the physician enter the prescription electronically into a laptop or, better yet, a hand-held device. The system then records the prescription and prints the script that can actually be read. The physician initials the prescription as the patient is leaving.)

Address the issues of security and privacy – Some of the most vocal critics of EMR warn of security and privacy issues. Whenever information is digitized, the ability to share that information increases exponentially. Standards as described above must address the security and privacy issues, accompanied by communications to reassure patients and providers alike. Security and privacy standards are essential if EMR is to obtain support from physicians and, more importantly, from patients.

Espouse a vision beyond the EMR – EMR that is well conceived and implemented does indeed offer tremendous potential for cost reductions and enhanced patient quality. But, EMR is only the first step. The ultimate vision should be on the Electronic Health Record (EHR), which would provide a long-term patient history covering multiple providers over an extended period of time. Our approach to EMR should include a roadmap for the eventual migration to an EHR environment. Patients will see many providers over a lifetime and a central repository for those experiences is essential for quality, affordable care.

Encourage competition – While standards for EMR technology are essential, these standards should in no way stand in the way of competition. Innovation by information technology companies – all working from a common platform – will assure continuing iterations of EMR that are faster and easier to use for years to come. We have seen this approach proven time and time again in the open code world of the Internet. This is another reason why common standards are essential.

Integrate EMR within a comprehensive approach – Most important of all, EMR must be integrated with all aspects of patient care, from the point at which an individual makes an appointment and arrives at the front desk to the time that a claim is filed, adjudicated, paid and reconciled in the practice management system. While EMR has the potential for cost savings, there are even greater potential savings within a system that provides automated, on-line information services and support throughout each patient encounter. Our healthcare system is in urgent need of integration for all clinical and financial transactions.

The EMR revolution is just beginning and there is still time to adopt an approach that will assure the realization of its full potential. But, this window of opportunity will be open for only a limited time; it is incumbent on the part of the Federal government, information technology companies and healthcare providers to come together to assure the greatest possible success.

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