AHIMA Conference Probes E-health Questions

Save to myBoK

by Gwen Hughes, RHIA

Ten years ago, few of us envisioned the explosion of the Internet. Neither did we anticipate that the Internet would permeate our lives and change a myriad of daily routines.

Today, with every magazine, business, and think tank trying to envision what further changes are in store, the time is right to establish guidelines for e-health. AHIMA has written tenets that will offer guidance in protecting the privacy and ensure the quality of personal health information on the Internet.

As a step in the development of these guidelines, AHIMA invited HIM professionals, industry experts, and representatives of consumer groups to discuss issues, concerns, and next steps at a May meeting in Washington, D.C.

Opportunity or Risk?

Among consumers, accessing health-related information on the Web is wildly popular. For example, in 1999, the America Online Health Channel drew more than 2 million unique visitors per month.[1]

HIM professionals are particularly interested in the development of systems that offer consumers and providers the ability to exchange complete and timely health information via the Internet. Specifically, a few systems allow consumers to access a provider-generated health record, and some Web sites provide consumers with tools to develop and maintain their own electronic personal health records.

But for all the opportunities the Internet presents, there are also risks. For example, personal health information made accessible via the Internet might be obtained and used inappropriately by unauthorized individuals or organizations. Alternatively, a consumer's health information might be entered fraudulently, altered without detection, or be incomplete, incorrect, out of date, or misinterpreted, resulting in financial or health-related harm to the consumer.

E-health presents many concerns. During the May conference, participants identified the following issues or concerns:

- health insurance discrimination
- use of the social security number as a personal identifier
- legislative jurisdiction
- notice of information practices
- security of information
- balance between public health needs and individual privacy
- divide between those with Internet access and those without
- the means to correct or amend information
- who will manage the information or arbitrate disputes?
- regulatory overlap
- communication and integration of various systems
- licensure issues related to patient/provider e-mail across state lines
- definition of the e-record and standardization of formats
- ownership of information
- whether different standards will be applied to records developed by providers, patients, and e-health companies
- what issues should be resolved voluntarily versus legislatively?

What Do We Do Now?

While the industry will not be able to resolve all of these issues at once, there are some possible next steps. During the conference, participants developed the following list of next steps:

- establish legislation that protects consumers against misuse of medical information
- establish legislation that ensures consumers' right to their health information in all 50 states
- develop a clearinghouse for publications and the provision of information for the various legislative/regulatory initiatives
- collect and disseminate best practice information
- educate consumers, providers, third-party payers, and government policy makers
- identify minimum data sets for most common transactions
- develop privacy attributes and conditional rules by data types

AHIMA's E-health Initiative

Using the information gathered during the conference along with many other resources, AHIMA's E-health Response Team has developed fundamental principles and operating tenets for placing consumer health records on the Internet. Approved by the AHIMA Board, these will soon be made available to AHIMA members, consumers, providers, the e-health industry, and other interested parties. The AHIMA principles and operational tenets for placement of patient health information on the Internet can serve as a blueprint that will allow consumers and providers to take advantage of the opportunities the Internet provides while minimizing the risks. Look for these principles and operational tenets in a future issue of the *Journal*.

Note

1. Goldstein, Douglas. *e-Healthcare: Harness the Power of Internet e-Commerce and e-Care*. Gaithersburg, MD: Aspen Publishers, 2000, p. 71.

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