Achieving a Nationwide Health IT Milestone

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by Linda Kloss, RHIA, CAE, chief executive officer

Electronic health record (EHR) systems achieve a great milestone this month. The Certification Commission for Healthcare Information Technology (CCHIT) will begin judging the first ambulatory EHRs on functionality, security, reliability, and interoperability criteria. As Mark Leavitt and Lisa Gallagher explain in "The EHR Seal of Approval," compliance certification is a key step to nationwide health IT adoption. CCHIT will now begin work on certification for hospital systems, while continuing to advance the ambulatory criteria. CCHIT's work does not have an end date. It will offer ongoing services that provide the de facto definition of what constitutes minimally acceptable systems.

Driving Adoption

Of course, certification is a threshold, and vendors will distinguish their products through outstanding application design, innovative functionality, and excellent service. Organizations from single practitioners to integrated delivery systems will still need to match their needs and preferences to the available certified products. In "What's Wrong with RFPs?" Dan Bedrosian and Michael J. McCoy outline alternative strategies for selecting hospital systems. The criteria for certification promise to be useful in the selection process. It is expected that they will simplify the selection process by allowing assessment to focus on specific user-defined needs rather than basic functionality and reliability.

Application service providers (ASPs) offer an alternative to licensing and installing EHR systems. They are an economical option that scale well for small providers and relieve them of the burden of system maintenance. However, this alternative is not without risk, which Thomas G. Dolan addresses in "Contracting for ASP Services." Functionality, security, reliability, and interoperability--the core CCHIT criteria--are key considerations for ASPs, as are issues relating to data ownership and risk mitigation.

Facing a sea of product choices and backed by fewer IT and financial resources than large organizations, small physician practices stand to benefit greatly from EHR certification. Suzanne Columbus discusses good system selection methods for small practices in "Small Practice, Big Decision."

Essential EHR Management Functionality

The ability to manage EHRs as business and legal records has come up again and again in our Health Level Seven work to define a functional standard for the EHR and in our CCHIT work to develop threshold criteria for certification. In "EHR Exam" Reed Gelzer and Patricia Trites illustrate how a test scenario can assess a system's ability to support essential functionality integral to legally sound records such as maintaining data integrity, authorship, attestation, nonrepudiation, and auditing. The challenge of maintaining and proving an EHR's legal validity is not insignificant, and we have much work to do. That work must start with educating standards developers, system developers, and those that purchase systems on an EHR's legal requirements.

Making the right purchase or contracting decision is important. But we all know that gaining value from IT requires successful implementation, fully trained users capable of taking full advantage of the system's functions, and a solid plan for how the system will evolve to meet changing business needs. These are topics we will address in next month's issue, as our focus on EHR systems continues.

The CCHIT ambulatory criteria are not static; CCHIT has published a road map for how criteria will evolve in 2007 and 2008. Organizations must have their own road maps for deploying health IT--and for measuring its impact and benefit.

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