

Behavioral Health Weighs in on Health IT

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by Michelle Dougherty, RHIA, CHP

As the national agenda for health IT continues to move forward, the behavioral health industry is working on organizing and establishing priorities for technology and electronic health record (EHR) implementation. Last September the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Software and Technology Vendors' Association (SATVA) teamed up to host the National Summit on Defining a Strategy for Behavioral Health Information Management and Its Role within the Nationwide Health Information Infrastructure, the first health IT summit focused on the needs, issues, and concerns of behavioral healthcare.

More than 140 behavioral healthcare leaders met in Washington, DC, to begin laying the foundation. The summit brought together participants from behavioral health professional and trade associations, government, provider organizations, consumers, standard-setting organizations, and business groups. As work continues to advance EHR and health IT issues, AHIMA will participate on work groups and committees furthering behavioral healthcare priorities.

Behavioral Health Issues

Behavioral health leaders realize health IT's potential benefits and value and its ability to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of services. They saw a need to convey health IT's importance to behavioral health providers, as well as strategize ways to promote adoption.

Leaders also recognized the unique health IT issues for behavioral health providers and consumers—particularly with exchange of health information and the nationwide health information network. Proper privacy and disclosure policies will be critical to protect patients as they and their health information move through the new electronic healthcare system. They believed that the specific interests and concerns of behavioral health would only be addressed through an organized effort.

Summit Priorities

SATVA and SAMHSA identified six initiatives that became the structure for intense work group discussions:

- Develop and maintain nationwide behavioral health informatics standards
- Develop and maintain nationwide initiatives to facilitate increased EHR adoption by behavioral health services and their participation in health information networks
- Address issues within behavioral health organizations to improve their implementation and effective use of information management and EHR systems
- Address the complexities of reimbursement, regulatory, and reporting requirements
- Address issues for consumers, their family members, clinicians, and other service providers related to EHR adoption
- Facilitate interconnectivity and information exchange between mental health and substance abuse treatment and prevention and other service systems

A report outlining the work group's strategies and recommendations is currently being reviewed by SAMHSA before being publicly disclosed. Tom Trabin, executive director of SATVA, summarized key recommendations from the summit as:

- Behavioral healthcare perspectives should be represented within general healthcare standards development organizations and within all EHR and regional health information network programs initiated through the Department of Health and Human Services and its agencies.
- A public-private and broadly representative behavioral health group should be formed that can coordinate and harmonize data standard work pertaining to behavioral healthcare, as well as coordinate incentive strategies for widespread EHR adoption.

- Basic clinical specifications for a behavioral health EHR should be defined and serve as the core of a broader set of behavioral health-specific software certification standards.¹

Watch for AHIMA's *e-Alerts* and the Behavioral Health Community of Practice for an announcement that the report has been released. Access to the slides and audio recordings from the summit are available at www.mhsip.org/itsummit.

Where Are the Initiatives Headed Now?

The Behavioral Health Treatment Standards Workgroup (BHTSG), which includes staff liaisons from SAMHSA and SATVA, is helping advance the action items from the summit. The group has a broad array of participants—providers, vendors, government, standards experts, associations, and others—that meet regularly both in person and via conference call. The work group has identified several specific initiatives.

Promote an understanding of behavioral health IT issues. BHTSG is actively engaged in outreach activities by speaking at conferences, communicating and coordinating with the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology, and developing a Web site as a central tool to keep the industry updated on key initiatives. A representative from the group is also on an AHIMA work group related to the privacy and security subcontract with RTI International.

Influence Health Level Seven (HL7) standards. HL7 is currently developing a standard for EHR systems. BHTSG plans to actively participate and influence the EHR system standard as well as other HL7 standards (electronic messaging, interfaces and services, clinical documents and templates, and data content initiatives). One of the group's key goals is to encourage more behavioral health professionals to get involved in the standards development process to ensure that standards developed reflect behavioral health issues and concerns.

Develop a behavioral health EHR system profile. Since the HL7 EHR standard is a superset of functions that apply across all healthcare settings, the BHTSG is organizing a work group to develop a profile that more specifically identifies the functionality and conformance criteria needed in behavioral health EHR products. Development of an EHR system profile for behavioral health will need significant input from providers, vendors, and other stakeholders. This work will also be available to inform and influence certification of behavioral health vendor products in the future.

How Does It Impact HIM?

As behavioral health makes a concerted effort to implement standards-based EHR products and influence the national health IT agenda, HIM professionals have a number of unique roles to play and issues to champion. HIM professionals can:

- Take an active role on EHR steering committees. It is important to have HIM expertise on or leading the committee.
- Understand key e-HIM® issues. HIM professionals should be aware of emerging issues and practices in e-HIM and lead their organizations through the transition in areas such as the legal EHR, standardized data content, and EHR management. Recognize that traditional practices will change and be prepared to implement new processes. Numerous practice briefs are available at www.ahima.org that will assist you in the transition.
- Evaluate your technology knowledge and skills. Momentum is building to increase the use of technology in behavioral health. Evaluate your technology skills and knowledge to ensure that you can participate in the EHR process. You don't have to be an IT expert, but at a minimum you should have a basic understanding of key IT concepts.
- Monitor health information exchange (HIE) initiatives. Regional health information organizations or HIEs will have a significant impact on the quality and efficiency of healthcare. There are a number of HIM issues in HIEs, such as patient identification, privacy, data quality, and disclosure policies. Begin monitoring local HIE activities and develop an understanding of key HIM issues.

The joint efforts of SATVA and SAMHSA along with the Behavioral Health Treatment Standards Group ensure that behavioral health IT initiatives move forward. For those interested in getting more involved in technology or EHR initiatives, there are a number of opportunities, particularly in the EHR standards development process. Getting involved helps bring the HIM perspective to the table and also increases your knowledge and understanding of the EHR and health IT.

Note

1. Trabin, Tom. "Preparing for a New Era: EHR Standards for Behavioral Healthcare." *Behavioral Healthcare*, April 2006, prepublication copy.

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