

Consumer Empowerment: Four Projects from AHIC Point to a New Direction in Healthcare

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by Jill Burrington-Brown, MS, RHIA

Consumer empowerment in healthcare is quickly becoming a national focus as a way to target rising healthcare expenditures, improve patient safety, and better healthcare information availability. Why is this movement of interest to the HIM community? There is much for us to contribute to the issue, and we should be at the front lines, leading the way.

As HIM professionals know, healthcare has cycled through many changes in the last three decades. We have seen the evolution of payment from self-pay to all types of insurance, managed care, health maintenance organizations, prospective payment, and preferred providers, to name just a few.

While our society has tried to put the brakes on escalating costs, other concerns are becoming high priorities. Patient safety, duplicate tests and treatment, and privacy and security have all generated national debate. The federal government has concentrated on the electronic health record (EHR) as a means to help solve these issues in coordination with defining and harmonizing standards to create an interoperable network.

The EHR is a huge project and will take many years to accomplish nationwide; however, there are some early projects to advance the initiative through the American Health Information Community (AHIC).

Four Projects for the Short Term

AHIC has initiated four projects to help individuals manage their healthcare and advocate for themselves. Each is intended to deliver clear benefits to consumers in the near term. (For more on AHIC and its "breakthrough projects", see Rode, D., "Market Power for the NHIN", *Journal of AHIMA* 77, no.3 [2006])

My Personal Health Record will create a way for individuals to track their own health status (or the health of those in their care) and grant immediate access to their authorized care providers. It is envisioned as a way to monitor routine health information as well as chronic disease status. As HIM managers, we know the value of maintaining our own personal health records, and we have the tools and skills to help others learn to manage theirs, either electronically, as encouraged by AHIC, or in paper to start with, as many individuals do currently.

My Medication History project is a place to store current medication data that is accessible to the individual as well as the authorized clinicians treating him or her. The national interest in this project was highlighted in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when the need for such information to be in a place where it can be accessed easily, yet still be confidential, became apparent. In fact, the members of AHIC acknowledge the influence and success of the www.KatrinaHealth.org in connecting evacuated people with their medication records. They cite the need to establish such a record universally.

The My Health Record Locator project will help track where personal health data are stored. Most individuals have health information stored in many locations. David Brailer, MD, PhD, national coordinator for health IT, explained at the November AHIC meeting that My Health Record Locator is "simply an index of where [medical information] exists for that person."¹ The development of regional health information organizations or health information exchanges could accomplish this.

The last breakthrough project, My Registration Information, will be a single, centralized, updatable database containing common information usually collected by all providers, such as name, address, insurance, medications, and allergies. A single electronic health registration will make it easier to relay the correct and complete information regarding a patient each time a care provider needs it. According to AHIC, consumers could update the database electronically and subsequently share the change with all of their individual care providers.²

HIM's Part

AHIC believes that one of the keys to the breakthrough projects is getting consumers involved in their own healthcare and establishing personal accountability. Along with that accountability is the necessity of improving consumers' health literacy. HIM professionals have the ability and opportunity to engage in initiatives educating consumers on their own personal health record (see www.MyPHR.com), about privacy and security (during Health Information Privacy and Security week, April 9-16), and about health information and technology (during Health Information and Technology week, November 5-11). We should use these opportunities to educate the public about healthcare resources and how we can help them as patient information advocates.

Notes

1. American Health Information Community (AHIC). Meeting transcript, November 29, 2005. Available online at www.hhs.gov/healthit/documents/November29thTranscript.pdf.
2. AHIC. "American Health Information Community Potential Breakthroughs." October 7, 2005. Available online at www.hhs.gov/healthit/breakthrough.html.

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