

For Health Records on the Internet, the Future Is Now

Save to myBoK

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One of the *Journal's* editorial goals is to blend practical information that readers can use to improve practice today with topics that foretell future trends. The theme for this month's focus articles defies such neat classification. Health records on the Internet are undoubtedly the future, but the future has arrived with startling speed. This is a defining issue for HIM, and if we blink, we will miss the boat. Don't assume you can pursue this topic at your leisure. Leisure has no place in this dialogue.

The E-business of Health Records

The speed with which the Internet becomes a healthcare tool is not controlled by the healthcare industry. It's controlled by the consumer. One estimate says that 67,000 new users jump on the Internet every day. By 2005, more than half of US consumers will have access to a computer at home or at work.¹

The scope and stakes are awesome. The rate of new health information application startups and product line enhancements speaks volumes about expected commercial benefits. Just categorizing the types of products and services is a challenge, but Mark Hagland provides a great framework for us in our cover story, "Online Consumer Health Records: Revolution or Confusion?"

Some approaches use the Internet to extend the capability of the provider-based electronic medical record (EMR). Dixie Baker describes a rigorously designed application in "PCASSO: A Model for Safe Use of the Internet in Healthcare." But be assured that many expedient short cuts will be taken on the path to healthcare Internet riches. As Baker says, "the problem facing healthcare today is how to capitalize on Internet and Web technologies to improve quality, lower costs, enable telemedicine, and provide consumer health services while protecting confidential information, patient privacy, and human safety."

This is precisely why health records and the Internet is not a futures issue for HIM. Our chance to make an impact on confidentiality, privacy, data accuracy, and other key practices is now.

The most obvious imperative is to be an active, knowledgeable Internet user, well versed in the technology. Many of us use e-mail, visit favorite Web sites from time to time, and maybe even seek answers to practice questions by searching AHIMA's or other sites. This is great, but we all need to go beyond casual use to reach a level of understanding that will enable us to design and support HIM applications.

Another obvious imperative is to make fullest use of your organization's intranet and Internet to improve operations today. Bill Thielemann and Susan Postal provide many great suggestions for such initiatives in "Intranets: A Way to Connect." And Gretchen Murphy provides a six-part action plan for improving policies and practices for provider-to-patient e-mail in "Patient-centered E-mail: Developing the Right Policies."

The HIM Agenda for the Internet

There are several barriers to using the Internet for healthcare information, including several of significance to HIM professionals.² First, consumers will demand special protection for this most personal of personal information. The security challenge is significant and the end-to-end solutions are not trivial. We need to be uncompromising in our approaches.

Our work to comply with HIPAA requirements will be the proving ground for addressing this barrier. Other barriers include the mixed quality of information on the Internet, the disarray of healthcare information systems, and the lack of uniformity of standards and language of healthcare. Here, too, we can make a difference.

An AHIMA task force is now preparing a position statement on health records on the Internet. We cannot be silent or passive on this high-stakes issue.

Notes

1. Mittman, R., and M. Cain. "The Future of the Internet in Health Care: Five-year Forecast." Institute for the Future, California HealthCare Foundation, January 1999.
2. *Ibid.*

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