

Health Information Exchange: Familiar Issues, Thorny Options

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by Linda Kloss, RHIA, CAE, FAHIMA

The most perplexing issues facing health information exchange (HIE) include patient identification, provider authentication, consent and other privacy issues, financial sustainability, and meaningful consumer engagement.

Intense work on these issues is under way. A new confidentiality and security work group under the American Health Information Community has been convened to take up authentication and other knotty issues. AHIMA president Jill Callahan Dennis serves on this group. Connecting for Health has published valuable policy guidance in its Common Framework. The National Committee on Vital and Health Statistics, the National Alliance for Health Information Technology, and other groups have published white papers. In addition to participating in these projects, AHIMA's Foundation of Research and Education recently released research on state-level HIE conducted for the Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT.¹

Information Stewardship

In "Getting Information Rights Right" Adele Waller outlines essential elements of participation agreements for HIE. Waller examines the legal framework for HIE, including HIPAA and other federal statutes and state law. She outlines key elements for data-sharing agreements, including data rights and responsibilities among participants and between participants and the HIE entity.

Carol Diamond and Lygeia Ricciardi offer an overview of Connecting for Health's Common Framework in "Building Consumer Trust in Health Information Exchange." The framework's technical and policy guidelines were developed jointly by more than 100 organizations, with a core belief that private health information should remain in the hands of the doctors, hospitals, and others whom patients trust rather than be centralized by a third party who has no direct relationship with the patient.

Gaining Consumer Confidence

There is no doubt that the recent spate of data breaches gives all of us pause about our ability to be effective stewards of confidential health information. In "Data Theft and State Law" Alan S. Wernick describes the legal basis for breach notification obligations and outlines essential elements for risk management. Use this information to assess your organization's plans for preventing and responding to data breaches.

Our thanks to the members of AHIMA's Personal Health Record Practice Council for preparing "Helping Consumers Select PHRs." The guidance provided in this article helps us be more effective in advising consumers about their options. (Also visit AHIMA's Web site, www.MyPHR.com, for more resources.)

HIE and HIPAA

There is still much misunderstanding and misinterpretation of HIPAA. This is compounded by HIEs. I have heard reports of hospitals and doctors refusing to exchange information because HIPAA does not allow it. Yet sharing of information for treatment, payment, or healthcare operations is allowed under HIPAA.

HIM professionals, particularly those serving as privacy officers, should become well-versed in the HIE application of HIPAA and should participate in development of policy for local and state initiatives. AHIMA has compiled HIE resources in its Health Information Exchange Resource Tool Kit at www.ahima.org/. Here you will find resources that help you be an effective advisor and advocate for effective information stewardship in HIE.

Note

1. Foundation of Research and Education. "Development of State Level Health Information Exchange Initiatives." 2006. Available online at www.staterhio.org.

Article citation:

Kloss, Linda L. "Health Information Exchange: Familiar Issues, Thorny Options." *Journal of AHIMA* 77, no.10 (November-December 2006): 27.

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