

Healthcare's Future Transformation

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Kolodner: National Health IT Agenda Is about Improving Care

Robert Kolodner, MD, has the future of healthcare in his sights. It's a future in which healthcare delivery is transformed—and health information management is a key part of the process.

Kolodner, who heads the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC) in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), described the future as he sees it. Kolodner also gave the audience an update on the status and progress of the federal health IT agenda and described some of the newest developments.

'Make It Personal'

Kolodner encouraged the audience to ask themselves, "what's the quality of care you want for yourself and your family? What's the quality and value of healthcare service you demand? Make it personal." He then asked the audience as professionals to consider "how do you advance the healthcare agenda so we can give the best quality care?"

Currently, Kolodner said, the healthcare system is one that primarily intervenes in chronic illness. In the future, he said, the emphasis should be more on preventive care, using genetic information to predict and intervene in diseases earlier.

In our current system, clinical data is in silos, he said. "It can't move or communicate. It needs to move to broader support of healthcare and move to practices, home, and the workplace."

The Federal Plan and the Work to Be Done

Kolodner described ONC's purpose as "not a technology focus, but to put infrastructure in place to improve the quality and efficiency of healthcare. That's the national HIT agenda," he said. "It's about improving health and care." He described several ONC projects supporting that goal.

But health IT has many parts, all of them interrelated, Kolodner reminded attendees. These include electronic health records, personal health records, and public health information. These must work simultaneously with standards (for data, technology, and security) and an interoperable HIE network, also known as the nationwide health information network (NHIN).

The country has some way to go, Kolodner said, citing low EHR adoption rates in many facilities, particularly smaller physician offices and smaller hospitals. "The majority of healthcare in the US today is delivered in small practices, where we have a low adoption rate," he said. "That is a problem and a barrier to moving to prevention and prediction."

Factors that drive adoption, Kolodner said, are rising costs, greater understanding of the benefits to consumers, and the economy as to the impact on quality and effectiveness of care, clinical leadership, and political leadership. "On the Hill and in the White House the need to move forward on health IT is recognized," Kolodner said. The issue has bipartisan support, he noted.

How to Make Progress

How will the industry make progress? "It isn't a straight line," Kolodner said. He expects the industry to hit a proverbial "tipping point," after which time "things will really take off."

The approach ONC has taken, he said, is to leverage small interventions to make progress. As people grow more comfortable with electronic records, Kolodner expects to see "a transformation in healthcare and delivery."

Kolodner said five pieces of the puzzle are needed:

- Standards in health IT products
- Privacy and security policies. These are important both at the federal and state level, Kolodner said. States are beginning to work together, and “We now see a dialogue that has not occurred before to identify issues,” he said.
- National health information network—“to link us together,” Kolodner said. He noted that HHS last week announced awards to nine health information exchanges to form a NHIN collaborative. The intent, he says, is that by next year they will be operational-moving information between each other.
- Adoption of interoperable health IT
- Governance—to coordinate all the pieces. Currently governance and oversight have been provided by the American Health Information Community. While this group has “made more progress in three years than has been made in the last two decades,” Kolodner said, change is in the wind. Kolodner told the audience that a “next-generation” model of this group is expected to emerge in 2008 to provide continuity of leadership, a sustainable business model, and decisive action.

A transformed healthcare system, Kolodner said, will lead to individuals managing more of their own care, improved public health, and a safer, healthier nation. “Health IT is a key enabler for us all to get the healthcare we deserve,” he said.

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