

Opportunities in E-health

Save to myBoK

by Gwen Hughes, RHIA

At this very moment, a number of HIM professionals are exercising their skills in the e-health arena. Opportunities abound, however, for others who would like to take the lead and enter the burgeoning field of e-health.

Defining E-health

Before we discuss these opportunities, however, it's important to understand what is meant by "e-health." When an "e" or an "e-" precede a word or term, as in the case of e-commerce or efinance, the "e" stands for electronic. An e-book therefore, is an electronic book. E-health means electronic health, or more specifically health improvement and disease management techniques that use the Web and other interactive electronic communication tools.

Consider the following examples of e-health:

- the mother of a feverish child looks up the frequently asked questions section of her pediatrician's Web site for advice in the middle of the night
- a woman struggling to lose weight seeks the support of others also struggling to lose weight in an Internet chat room
- a diabetic purchases supplies and medical equipment online
- a man sets up an appointment and discusses a billing issue with his physician's office via e-mail
- a daughter visits the online discharge instructions made available to authorized individuals by a hospital from which her mother was recently discharged
- a pregnant woman picks up a prescription from a pharmacy. The pills look a little different than usual. By checking the personal health record she maintains on her own computer, she's able to determine that the pharmacist has given her the wrong prescription
- at Sparrow Health System's Web site friends and family members can view a picture of an important new baby in their lives.¹ To access the picture, the individual visits the Sparrow Web site, clicks on the new baby icon, and enters the user name and password provided by the family. While online, the individual visits the online gift shop and makes a donation to the hospital's foundation
- at White Plains Hospital Center in New York, a patient's brother sets up a private Internet page and enters the e-mail addresses of loved ones. The program then e-mails these pre-approved visitors a password and notifies them every time the patient's brother updates the Web page. The brother keeps remote friends and family updated as to the progress of surgery and recovery by posting updates on the Web page. When the patient is feeling better, she posts her own message. In addition, her friends and family write back and order flowers online
- a patient keeps in touch with her physician via a service wherein her e-mails to and from her physician are encrypted, and her physician receives a \$10 to \$20 payment for each e-mail he answers
- at Beth Israel and Deaconess Hospitals in Boston, clinicians can access a patient's record including a complete set of emergency data via Web browser. Especially for critical emergency room scenarios, this access leads to faster medical intervention and a higher level of patient care. Ultimately, they intend to give patients the ability to review their records on the Web and to interact directly with their doctors via secure messaging application²
- consumers click on icons to originate their own electronic personal health records at health Web sites, such as the Health Channel at www.thehealthchannel.com, WebMD at www.webmd.com, and Thrive Online at www.thriveonline.com.

The Growing Demand

What's amazing about e-health is the growing demand for it. A recent Harris Poll showed that almost 100 million adults nationwide go online to look for health information.³ According to the poll, these adults look for health information three times a

month on average.

A survey of almost 12,000 Internet health seekers recently published by P/S/L Research indicates that:⁴

- 78 percent of the people surveyed would like to be able to contact a medical professional by e-mail
- 61 percent indicate that they have made positive lifestyle changes based on the information found on the Internet
- one third report that they are already receiving different treatment as a result of information they found on the Internet

How Can We Contribute?

Each of the e-health scenarios provided in this article has the potential to involve individually identifiable health information. And in each of these examples, HIM professionals can enhance product development through the following skill sets and attributes:

- an understanding of an e-health organization's obligation to inform consumers about what personal health information is collected, who is collecting the data, and how it is used
- an understanding of the processes needed to facilitate the collection of authentic, accurate, timely, and complete individually identifiable personal health information
- familiarity with the laws, regulations, and processes needed to ensure the privacy and security of individually identifiable health information
- an understanding of and ability to apply applicable federal and state laws and regulations relative to retention, disclosure, and destruction

Already, members of the HIM profession are working in e-health organizations. Among them are privacy and compliance officers, data quality managers, and those in product development and sales. Still other opportunities exist as security officers, Internet strategists, and directors of electronic health information.

How to Get in the Game

How should HIM professionals prepare for the myriad opportunities in e-health?

1. Learn to speak the language. For example, there are a couple of buzzwords related to e-commerce with which HIM professionals should be familiar. The first is "B to B," which refers to business to business. B to B business conducted over the Internet includes:

- a transcription service that sends the finished product to the healthcare provider via the Internet
- an application service provider (ASP) wherein a vendor provides a client, for example a small physician office, with hardware and software, maintenance, upgrades, back-up and disaster recovery services in exchange for a monthly fee

The second buzzword is "B to C," which refers to business to consumer. Examples of B to C business or services would include:

- an online pharmacy
- chat groups offered by a health Web site

2. Become comfortable with the technology. Consider subscribing to periodicals such as Smart Computing in Plain English and AHIMA's In Confidence.
3. Familiarize yourself with the issues, such as cookies, pitfalls, and scams, and evaluating the quality of health information on the net. Read at least the executive summary of the Privacy Report by the California Healthcare Foundation.⁵ Attend conventions, Webcasts, and teleseminars relative to e-health. Follow e-health news stories online and in the newspaper.
4. Visit personal health record sites.

5. Become familiar with e-health resources such as AHIMA's tenets, and other ethical codes, cyberseal programs, standards, legislation, and case studies.
6. Network with colleagues in and about e-health. Find out what they are doing in e-health and how they got there.

HIM professionals' knowledge about record content, documentation requirements, data quality, information management, compliance, privacy and security have made them valuable assets to the ambulatory, acute, and long-term care organizations where they have traditionally applied their skills. These same skills are every bit as valuable to e-health organizations. For those willing to take the lead, opportunities in e-health abound.

AHIMA's Definition of E-Health Organizations

E-health organizations electronically deliver or facilitate the delivery of healthcare products, services, or information to healthcare businesses and/or healthcare consumers. An e-health company may be a provider of direct or indirect healthcare services. Two distinct categories of e-health companies are evolving: business to business (B to B) companies, and business to consumer (B to C) companies.

Examples of B to B e-health companies are those that use the Internet to:

- provide electronic medical record systems to individual physicians or access to clinical databases to healthcare providers/organizations
- provide remote support services such as transcription, coding, release of information, or billing to healthcare providers/organizations
- provide an application service provider (ASP) model for the delivery and maintenance of application software to healthcare providers/organizations
- offer online supply chain services that facilitate the purchase of medical supplies by healthcare providers/organizations
- provide connectivity for transmitting orders and results between a reference laboratory and healthcare organization's laboratory

Examples of B to C e-health companies are those that use the Internet to:

- provide access to general medical information (content)
- offer healthcare services to a select group or the general public
- provide access to record keeping systems that allow individuals to maintain their own health records
- provide access to provider databases for obtaining personal test results
- allow individual consumers to self-schedule in registration systems at provider organizations

This definition was created by AHIMA's E-health Task Force.

Notes

1. Visit Sparrow Health System online at www.sparrow.com.
2. Haimila, Sandra. "Maximizing Medical Records Retrieval." KMWorld, May 8, 2000. Available online at www.kmworld.com.
3. "Cyberchondriacs Update." HarrisInteractive poll results available online at www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=229.
4. "A Modular Study to Understand the Impact of the Internet on i-Healthseekers." P\SL Research, April 2001.
5. Goldman, Janlori, Zoe Hudson, and Richard M. Smith. "Report on the Privacy Policies and Practices of Health Web Sites." California Healthcare Foundation, January 2001. Available online at <http://ehealth.chcf.org> under "privacy."

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