

RHIOs at a Crossroads

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Regional health information organizations (RHIOs) represent what is best about public service organizations in our country. They are voluntary organizations formed by people who want to improve the safety and quality of healthcare by making reliable information available where it is needed for patient care.

Expeditionary Challenges

Sarath Malepati, Kathryn Kushner, and Jason S. Lee describe the very real organizational, political, and financial challenges in “RHIOs and the Value Proposition.” Despite well-documented quality and cost issues in healthcare, trust is hard to establish and sustain even among the committed and well intentioned. The authors cite the challenges of getting to the point where a system competes on “quality rather than information ownership.”

The first phase of the nationwide health information network prototype project is now complete. Lessons learned from tests of four approaches are reported in “This Year’s Models.” The article focuses on the technical and information challenges of accurately matching and identifying patients. In the words of one contractor, “There aren’t insurmountable technology issues, but there are potentially insurmountable data integrity issues.” Other important lessons learned relate to financial sustainability and the human issues of gaining and retaining the support of stakeholders.

Beacons of Light

Lest we despair, Dianne Koval describes the experiences of a RHIO that is working at all levels in “Plugging in Physician Practices.” Having gained the trust of key stakeholders, the THINC RHIO in New York’s Hudson Valley region is now helping physicians implement EHRs and practice management solutions. This will add value and lower operating costs for physicians and thereby for the entire network. Koval provides advice and caution regarding the difficulty of automating physician practices.

Nebraska has a network of RHIOs that may soon be knit together into a statewide health information exchange initiative. In “Nebraska’s Far-flung HIEs Move Forward” we learn how providers and payers are working together in new ways that will eventually enhance patient care and patient safety across the state. HIM professionals are playing important roles in this work, and in the words of a RHIO leader, only HIM professionals “totally understand the nuances and the details about how data needs to be presented.”

State-level health information exchange is the focus of Health and Human Services-funded research being conducted through AHIMA’s Foundation of Research and Education (FORE). In “HIE at the State Level” we meet leaders of statewide initiatives who are working hard to build sustaining organizations that serve the public interest.

A statewide perspective compounds the challenges of convening and collaborating; it requires bringing state government agencies to the table and coordinating with state quality initiatives making effective use of information for the public good. To date, the FORE project has produced a workbook for developing statewide initiatives and a series of studies on targeted issues such as how federal and state activities should be coordinated.

RHIOs need moral, financial, and expert support. There needs to be closer coordination, more shared learning, and more time. Successful public-private collaboration at the community and state levels is critical to improving healthcare, but the looming healthcare crisis means we don’t have a decade to figure all this out. So get on board and support the efforts in your community and your state.

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