To E or Not to E: HIM and the Dawn of E-health

Save to myBoK

by Sandra Fuller, MA, RHIA

How will e-health affect the way we work? This article takes a look at the ways the Internet will affect various HIM roles—and the impact HIM professionals can have on the e-health industry.

E-commerce, e-shopping, e-mail—seems like there's an "e" in front of almost every word these days. What about health information management? Is HIM headed for cyberspace? And if the world is going to the Web, how ready is HIM to follow —or lead?

As we try to imagine our professional future in relation to the use of Internet tools, we may find some answers in looking at the new roles Vision 2006 envisions. In this article, we will look specifically at the changes and opportunities that the Web may create for each of these roles.

You've Got E-health!

Health information is certainly headed to the Internet.[1] E-health companies are springing up as fast as venture capital can be poured in to fund them. These companies provide services that range from storing patient records and providing reference information to advertising for clinical services. Some are directed toward patients, some toward providers, and some serve the information interface between healthcare companies.

But moving health information to the Web is far from simple. A report from the California HealthCare Foundation cites the following barriers for the future of the Internet in healthcare:[2]

- security concerns
- the characteristics of the Internet
- the mixed quality of information on the Internet
- physician ambivalence
- the disarray of healthcare information systems
- lack of resources for Web development
- too many standards

HIM professionals can affect almost all of these barriers—either individually or collectively through AHIMA. But are we ready to participate in this transformation? We need to answer some questions, such as:

- how does our professional future relate to the use of the Internet?
- how is AHIMA positioned to provide leadership and support in e-health issues?
- how are HIM professionals prepared for this element of the future?

A Web-enabled Future

As a profession, we continually ask how factors in the environment will affect our roles. We have put computerization, mergers and acquisitions, the reduction in hospital services, the move to ambulatory care, and the increase in an aging population under the microscope to ascertain their effect on HIM. In response to these changes (and others), we have redesigned our curriculum, developed new certifications, intensified our focus on lifelong learning, and outlined new roles.

In the last few years, these efforts have been coordinated through the Vision 2006 initiative. Vision 2006 describes seven new roles for health information managers in the future:

- clinical data specialist
- data resource administrator
- data quality manager
- decision support and research analyst
- health information manager in an integrated delivery system
- information security manager
- patient information coordinator

Information Security Managers—Getting a Lock on Information

The information security manager described by Vision 2006 will doubtless see many changes. Transmitting patient information on a worldwide network designed to increase access will, to say the least, complicate the issues of security. Traditional healthcare providers will face new challenges when they move their information via the Web. And companies that do not appreciate the laws that govern healthcare privacy, the appropriate federal and state regulations, the issues of patient concern for loss of privacy, and the content of healthcare information will face even more challenges.

These concerns have delayed acceptance of Web technology for use in healthcare but create great opportunity for health information managers seeking jobs as information security managers.[3] The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) of 1996 draft regulations acknowledge these issues by requiring a designated information security officer.

Data Quality Managers—Exerting Influence

Data quality managers will certainly be affected by the strategies employed to populate Web-based medical records. People who understand the importance of data quality and the information management processes that impact quality can influence the formulation of these strategies at the outset. Certain data, such as family history, can be collected directly from the patient reasonably easily, but medication history may require access to previous records to ensure accuracy. Data quality managers can also address issues of legibility, completeness, timeliness, and accuracy—all contributing to the success of any personal health record system maintained on the Web.

Data Resource Administrators—Knowledge Is Power

Data resource administrators work to ensure that information is available for use when and where it is needed. Development of a Web strategy is certainly a part of those decisions.

Not only can the Web be used as a way to transport information about a patient to a remote location, but it can also be used to collect and view information. For example:

- a provider could update patient demographic information prior to an appointment by sending patients e-mail and asking them to enter a secure site to update their data
- information about a complaint could be collected prior to the patient's appointment based on a question tree that would not only collect data but could potentially triage patients into earlier or later appointments
- finally, reference information can easily be made available to providers and patients via the Web, but identifying the best source of information and linking it to data captured during an encounter requires careful planning and the unique skills of a data resource administrator

Managers in Integrated Delivery Systems—Across the Board

We have already seen excellent examples of how a health information manager in an integrated delivery system might use the Web for training employees, maintaining policies and procedures, and communicating across several sites.[4] And organizations like the University of Washington Medical Center and Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center are using Web tools, intranets, and virtual private networks to capitalize on Web technology within integrated delivery systems.[5]

Patient Information Coordinators—Showing the Way

The role most revolutionized by the Web is most likely to be that of the patient information coordinator (PIC). The PIC role is based on patients having a stronger voice in the healthcare system. Vision 2006 suggests that a PIC would help individual patients by:

- ensuring the timely transfer of patient information among healthcare providers in diverse settings along the continuum
- showing patients how to manage their personal health histories
- explaining who has access to health information and for what purposes
- explaining how managed care works
- showing patients how to access computer-based information resources[6]

All of these functions are at the core of the e-health applications on the Internet. To migrate to this role, HIM professionals with traditional backgrounds may require additional training in customer service in addition to knowledge of Web-based resources.

Although this list is not an exhaustive description of the possible roles HIM managers will play in e-health, our vision of the future is well positioned to carry us into this new arena.

A Site to See: www.ahima.org

How well is AHIMA positioned to provide leadership position in health information on the Web and in supporting member advancement into positions with Web-based companies? Right now, AHIMA's Board of Directors has launched an e-health initiative to address the unique health information challenges posed by the Internet.

This initiative focuses on advocacy, education, leadership, and ongoing surveillance. A special task force will define the tenets of practice that should apply to all patient-specific information maintained and transmitted across the Web. The group also will address key issues like ownership, access, data quality, and security. Watch for more articles in the *Journal* on these topics as we work to increase member awareness of the growth of the e-health industry.

Since AHIMA introduced its Web site in 1997, the organization has posted more than 2,000 pages of HIM practice information online. Increasingly, AHIMA has encouraged our members to use the site as a practice resource. Our Interactive Learning Campus, established in 1999, offers continuing education via the Web. The HIM Learning Institute provides a resource for educators training future professionals. This year will see additional development that will allow members to better communicate with each other in communities of practice.

The site also provides a cost-effective method for AHIMA to present information about HIM and our members to consumers and employers. Already thousands of patients access AHIMA's site to gain information about their rights and responsibilities in maintaining their own health information. The site will be used as a delivery mechanism for much of an image enhancement campaign that will be launched in 2000.

In addition, AHIMA increasingly uses the Internet and Web as a supporting infrastructure for our daily work. Virtual task force meetings are being started. E-mail communication has replaced phone and voice mail as the primary communication forum. "E-alerts" to members about practice information and new products increase our ability to serve members in a "real-time" way. We encourage all members to share their e-mail address with us by sending us e-mail at info@ahima.org.

The E-professional

As Web technologies aim to address the information needs of healthcare, information managers must increase their individual awareness and their knowledge of the technology and issues. A September 1999 AHIMA member assessment study found that 82 percent of members had access to the Internet, an increase of 61 percent over 1995. This rapid growth in Internet use clearly illustrates how important HIM professionals find this tool.

Why should HIM managers apply their existing knowledge to the unique challenges of the Web? Because the opportunities are limitless. HIM professionals assuming Vision 2006 roles will play an important part in mitigating the obstacles to Web-based health information. HIM managers should be increasing their knowledge of the tools and the principles to fill those roles.

There are many ways to increase your knowledge. An understanding of the technology used to link to the Web and how information packets are moved via the Internet will assist an information security manager in discussions of network design. But equally important is the knowledge of regulations, like those proposed for HIPAA, and how they will apply to traditional and e-health companies.

Although you may not need to become an Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) programmer, an understanding of that language and others is useful to understand the structure of information as it is displayed and transferred. Staying current with the developments in eXtensible Markup Language (XML) and how it may transform text-based documents into searchable data also will be important in developing a more standardized and useful health record in the future.

Though the language may be new, the issues are not. Innovative thinking about how removing the barriers of distance and access could improve patient care, affect documentation, and increase patient satisfaction is a great asset to any healthcare organization. Today the popularity of the Internet and the subsequent boom in e-health companies have brought the issue into the spotlight, and the time is now for HIM professionals to seize the opportunities.

And the opportunities are there. The 1999 Health on the Net Survey reported that 94 percent of respondents found useful health-related information on the Internet, but 68 percent felt that information needed to improve.[7] HIM professionals have an important role in defining how the Internet is used as a tool to improve the quality of and access to information. Are you ready to meet the challenges of the next practice frontier?

Notes

1. Hagland, M. "Online Consumer Health Records: Revolution or Confusion?" *Journal of AHIMA* 71, no. 3 (2000): 28-32.

2. Mittman, R., and Cain, M. *The Future of the Internet in Health Care*. Oakland, CA: California HealthCare Foundation, 1999.

3. *Ibid*.

4. Thieleman, William, and Susan Postal. "Intranets: A Way to Connect." *Journal of AHIMA* 71, no. 3 (2000): 40-45.

5. Schoenfelt, Suzanne. "Next Generation: How Internet Technology Propels the Electronic Medical Record." *Journal of AHIMA* 70, no. 8 (1999): 30.

6. American Health Information Management Association. *Evolving HIM Careers*. Chicago, IL: 1999, p. 53.

7. "Manhattan Research Guide to e-Health Metrics." Report by Manhattan Research, LLC, December 1999.

Next Steps For Navigating The Unknown

How can you decide where to go next to learn more about the Internet and e-health? These steps may be helpful:

- assess where your strengths currently exist
- be honest about what you don't know
- identify some expert resources to help better understand the topic in general
- consider what additional information would be most helpful
- identify a role model or mentor
- volunteer for projects that add to and stretch your knowledge of the topic

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