Transforming Healthcare: the Time for Change is Now

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by Linda Kloss, RHIA, CAE, chief executive officer

In recent remarks to Connecting for Health's steering group, David Brailer, MD, PhD, the national health information technology coordinator, noted that if this is the decade of health IT adoption, 2005 could well turn out to be the year of "maximum flexion." Brailer urged the healthcare industry to make it happen soon so the government does not have to impose a solution. Michael Leavitt, the new secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, supports the industry's adoption of health information technology, and health IT is a reform initiative that appears to have bipartisan support in Congress. With such backing, it is clear that the time to transform the American healthcare industry is now.

Connecting Clinicians

Brailer expects a sizeable increase in electronic health record (EHR) adoption next year, particularly as product certification for ambulatory EHRs and pay-for-use and pay-for-performance incentives become available. "EHRs, the Doctor Will See You Now" lays out the barriers and benefits of medical practice EHRs along with experiences of physicians who implemented them early. Most small medical practices do not have HIM professionals on staff to guide implementation and help physicians realize the benefits of EHR systems. Colleagues who work for quality improvement organizations are gearing up to provide support services, and all HIM professionals should get involved in supporting their efforts and connecting clinicians.

A major challenge for physician acceptance of EHR systems is how computers in exam rooms will affect interaction with patients. Researchers at the Medical University of South Carolina show that entering visit notes into a computer does not have a negative impact. These and other findings are reported in "Physicians, Patients, and EHRs," original research funded in part by AHIMA's Foundation of Research and Education.

Building a National Network

It is essential that EHR implementation ramp up in all healthcare organizations. AHIMA's e-HIMTM initiative has produced a number of practice briefs about transitioning from paper to electronic records, and more projects are in the works this year. Industry experts Carroll Schnabel, Keith Olenik, Deborah Kohn, and Mary Ellen Mahoney discuss the current state of document management in "The State of Document Management: An HIM Roundtable."

A national health information network in the US cannot exist until information can be exchanged between organizations to support safe and effective care. Much good work is being done to design the national network for the US, and the Connecting for Health project has been a key convener of the best thinkers. A recently published report from the initiative, titled "Linking Health Care Information: Proposed Methods for Improving Care and Protecting Privacy," is a must-read for HIM professionals. John Halamka, MD, a member of the work group that prepared the report "Challenges and Opportunities in Linking Patient Records," discusses the challenges and describes pilot projects in forming regional health information organizations in Massachusetts.

Regional health information organizations are being formed across the country, and HIM professionals must be involved in their formation. As Halamka reminds us, "the challenges are not technical," they involve people, policy, and process. We urge all HIM professionals to get involved early in regional projects so you can affect decisions being made about how information is to be exchanged and handled. If not you, then who?

Article citation:
Kloss, Linda. "Transforming Healthcare: The Time for Change Is Now." *Journal of AHIMA*
76, no.4 (April 2005): 23.

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