

Worlds Collide: Health Information Meets the Internet

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by Julie A. Holland, BS, MRA, RHIA

How can healthcare organizations effectively use the Internet to support care delivery? And what can HIM professionals do to help? This article describes what you can do to help your employer enter the Internet era.

Make no mistake, the Internet is keeping us all racing to stay up to date with new technologies, regulations, advances, and opportunities. But after all the excitement has died down, the question for healthcare remains: how can we use the power of the Internet to reengineer and support care delivery? And how does health information play a role in this process?

The healthcare industry will be working to answer these questions in the coming years, and HIM professionals are ideally positioned to lead the charge. We, who have been designing and redesigning processes for decades, are the logical and most appropriate choice to help determine how, when, and what health information will be used in the e-healthcare world. This article explores what some organizations are already doing along these lines and how HIM professionals can get involved.

Health Information: Who Needs It and Why?

What is "health information," anyway? The answer depends on who you ask:

- for HIM professionals, it's information that has traditionally been stored in a paper chart, whether it is housed in a hospital, physician office, clinic, health department, or any other facility that provides patient care
- for healthcare consumers, who take a broader view, it's anything related to any healthcare encounter they have experienced in their lives, including insurance payments, physician office visits, and prescription records
- for payers, it's coded data submitted to support billing, plus any miscellaneous information required to further explain diagnoses and treatments

The list goes on and on.

Sooner or later, someone will need all the information accumulated along the entire continuum of patient care. The trick has always been to determine **who** should access **what** information and **how** to make it universally available in a cost-effective manner.

Vendors have touted the electronic medical record for years, but many organizations are still seeking fully functioning product that meets the information demands described above-not to mention the need to become more efficient and economical. Although traditional vendors understand the many relationships that complicate the healthcare information environment, their advances in technology are falling behind the lightning-fast pace of the demands that HIM professionals face.

Why Use the Internet?

Why use the Internet? The pros and cons of this question are still being debated.

From a technology and traffic standpoint, the Internet is the only single available medium that is capable of handling the estimated 30 billion transactions per year healthcare generates.¹ These transactions include payments, treatment approvals, prescriptions, lab orders, and reports of test results. What's more, an increasing number of people are using the Internet?ither daily or intermittently?o become familiar with navigating and gathering information. Add the ease with which a person can potentially access his/her own or family health information without having to make an appointment, get in the car, fight traffic, take off from work, and wait to see the doctor, and the Internet appears to be the perfect solution. But is it?

Regulatory Issues

Even though the United States doesn't formally have national health insurance, the federal government still pays approximately half of all healthcare bills. With that type of economic power, any regulations deemed fit by this colossal payer will be adhered to by those wishing to be paid. The Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) is the regulatory arm of the federal government responsible for setting standards and rules and overseeing all Medicare and Medicaid dollars.

HCFA is currently developing regulations for the single biggest change in HIM since the invention of file folders. Described in the "administrative simplification" sections of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA), the law's main objective is to make sure people can easily keep their health insurance when changing jobs. This law has momentous side effects for the maintenance and transmission of medical information, which must become just as portable as insurance.

For the first time, the federal government is mandating how electronic health records are to be stored and transmitted, addressing such issues as security, privacy, and the validity of electronic signatures. HIPAA also standardizes formats for attachments and the codes used on medical bills to describe diagnoses and procedures.

Odd as it may seem, there has been no national or industry standard in general use on most of these matters. They've been governed, if at all, by a jumble of state regulations and insurance company requirements and often, they've generated inefficiency and waste. Today, much information is still created and stored on paper. But as it moves to the computer, it will be subject to all HIPAA regulations.

HIPAA provides us with this question: **How can we leverage the potential of the Internet without sacrificing the absolute necessity of providing confidential information in a timely, efficient, and secure manner?** HIM professionals do not have to solve the technical issues surrounding security alone, but we need to make sure that all security and confidentiality issues are brought to light and addressed.

For the HIM professional, the Internet presents exciting opportunities for reengineering and support of care delivery. Think about all of the information that is manually passed through your department on a daily basis, then consider the effect of automating that information. With all of these issues covered, the HIM department's cost to the organization would decrease significantly, while service and customer satisfaction would increase.

For example:

- we would no longer need to support a large file clerk contingent, because all information would be generated and stored electronically
- most traditional release of information processes would be transformed. Most insurers would likely use the Internet to request and receive the information needed to support rapid and accurate billing and reimbursement if they were confident it was secure. Multi-facility organizations and off-campus offices would no longer present the "chart tracking" and "chart transportation" issues that have historically plagued our profession and organizations' ability to be efficient while providing quality services
- electronic authentication would shorten chart completion turnaround time, thereby lowering the number of delinquent records, frequently an issue for Joint Commission accreditation

What Are Other Organizations Doing?

Many facilities are making use of the Internet today to host Web sites that provide, among other things, medical information for patients, medical content for physicians, capture and storage of patient information, branding, and links to other Web sites and advertising. These may also feature information specifically aimed toward consumers, such as healthcare news updates, fitness and nutrition tips, answers to frequently asked questions, links to Web sites focusing on specific diseases, and patient chat groups.

Facilities benefit from providing such sites in many ways. For example, Web sites demonstrate specific areas of expertise and help build a link to the community. As a nice added bonus, all of the information is available to the entire world. To make sure that community members are getting credible health information on the Internet, one healthcare official has sent hospital staff members to public libraries and schools to give presentations about finding healthcare information on the Internet. The hospital's information systems department also issues a list of credible healthcare Web sites to libraries and schools.

Organizations also can use the Web to reach out to another audience—the healthcare provider community. They can provide services that would interest physicians, such as links to medical news and literature updates, literature search capabilities and easy access to reference materials, and communication links with other professionals. Physicians who are practicing in remote or isolated areas may be particularly interested in such services. One of the chief benefits of providing this type of information is that it helps the organization strengthen relationships with the referring physician community.

The flexibility and potential of the Internet is expanded still more with the advent of the application service provider (ASP). The ASP plays a role similar to that of a traditional middleman by offering clients access over the Internet to applications and services that they would otherwise have to locate on their own computers.

For example, some companies now provide ASP services in dictation and transcription. By using an ASP, the client (usually a hospital) can pay for dictation and transcription services on a per-line basis, rather than spending capital dollars for equipment.

Using an ASP, the client rents equipment and services rather than purchasing the necessary equipment to support these functions. The ASP assumes all maintenance, upgrade, and service responsibilities. All access to the service is Internet-driven, thereby allowing authorized users to work with a standard personal computer and an Internet browser. The user no longer has to be on site to access the system.

Some industry experts say that Internet so far has had the greatest effect with its ability to connect organizations to supply vendors. Some healthcare organizations are beginning to use a practice known as "reverse auction" to purchase supplies, in which a purchaser posts the supplies they need on a Web site and providers can submit bids.

How You Can Help

One of the most effective ways for the HIM professional to assist the facility in developing an Internet strategy is knowledge transfer. You should begin now to keep a running list of all of the types of information requested from your department and the reasons for the request.

Another perspective you can gather is how well the medical staff is adjusting to technology. This can be assessed by their reaction to a new dictation system or electronic signature or accessing your document imaging system.

But physicians can be a tough group to sell on the concept. Even if speed, security, and reliability are assured, physicians still might not use the Internet. You can help your organization start focusing on those physicians who support the new technology at the outset and those who may need a little extra help. As simple as this may seem, the information you provide could greatly influence the success of your organization's Internet strategy.

The HIM professional must become an ally to the leaders making Internet and technology decisions. A good place to start is to form an alliance with your organization's director of information systems or chief financial officer. Make these people aware of your resources and ability to ferret out reams of detail about information flow in your facility. You might be surprised to find out that you are truly one of very few who understands the magnitude of information needs for your organization, customers, staff, regulatory agencies, and caregivers.

The potential for opportunity is endless. For instance, HIM professionals who can address issues of data quality—such as legibility, completeness, timeliness, and accuracy, to name a few—can contribute to the success of many consumer-related endeavors such as personal health records. And HIM professionals' skills in important areas such as developing organization policies and interpreting regulations will continue to be in demand.

The leap between our past, present, and future is an exciting one. Our challenge is to ensure that we have the skills and information to position ourselves as the information management leaders in our organizations and to stay as knowledgeable as possible in the fast-paced, ever-changing environment of the Internet.

Note

1. Gardner, Elizabeth. "Healing the Health Care Business." *Internet World* 6, no. 10 (2000): 67.

Are You Up to Date?

In addition to resources provided at the AHIMA site, www.ahima.org, the following sites will help you get up-to-speed on the current state of the technology, future trends, regulatory issues, and general knowledge:

- "Nine Hot Technology Trends." Available at the Healthcare Informatics Web site at www.healthcareinformatics.com/issues/2000/02_00/feb00.htm
- An example of an Internet marketplace for medical products and services is available at MedMarket.com at www.medmarket.com
- Medinex Systems, an example of a company providing ASP and e-commerce and services, can be found at www.medinex.com
- Results of *Internet Health Care Magazine's* survey of 213 CIOs at hospitals and integrated delivery systems can be found at www.internethealthcaremag.com/html/survey00.htm. Also visit the *Internet Health Care Magazine* site (www.internethealthcaremag.com) for articles such as "Making a Connection" on Kaiser Permanente's interactive Web site (March/April 2000); "A Buyer's Market" on online medical supply purchasing (May/June 2000); "Web Site Lets Consumers and Doctors Find Their Own Answers," on online medical records (May/June 2000); and "Internet-Based Network Has Doctors Lining Up to Get Online," on strategies to persuade physicians to put the World Wide Web to use (May/June 2000)
- Visit the *Hospitals & Health Networks* site (www.hhnmag.com) for articles such as "The CEO's Guide to the Internet" (March 2000); "Health Care's Most Wired: Is an e-commerce gap emerging among the nation's hospitals?" (April 2000); "How Wired Are Hospitals & Health Systems?" (April 2000); "100 Most Wired Hospitals & Health Systems, Parts 1 and 2," (April 2000)

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