Health Information Technology (Health IT)

What is Health IT?

In order to improve patient safety, efficiency, and quality of care, the Institute of Medicine is recommending that the heath care system shifts health care records from the current, inefficient, expensive paper systems to electronic formats, or what is more generally known as Health Information Technology.[1] New standards of practices such as the use of electronic medical records (EMRs) have already proven successful in facilitating better communication with patients.[2] For example, a doctor can print out a list of medications for the patient so that he or she knows exactly what they are taking, in clear printed language, as well as the dosages.

Electronic charts are more secure. Unlike paper, electronic charts allow patients to track who has accessed their information. With electronic records there is an audit trail, electronic evidence of who looks at a chart as well as exactly what they looked at. With paper charts, there is no record of who has looked at a chart or what they viewed.[3]

Electronic records also facilitate quickly sharing accurate patient information between providers seeing the same patient. Health IT also allows the collection of important population health information such as rates of heart disease or diabetes across the state, allowing better health policy planning and decision-making.

The federal stimulus package included $19 billion to help providers afford Health IT systems. It also included a number of enhancements to federal privacy law, which will help people trust that electronic health information will be secure and shared appropriately. [4]

Problems with current health care practices and the need to improve patient care

-Medical errors are a serious problem. Between 44,000 and 98,000 Americans die in each year from medical errors that occur in hospitals, such as incorrect doses of medication given to the wrong patient.[5] Health IT can help greatly reduce such medical errors.

Other problems with the health care system in Connecticut (and elsewhere) include quality lapses, rising costs, and increasing rates of chronic disease. 17% of Americans report that test results or medical records were not available at a medical appointment in the last two years; that rate is twice as high for low income as for higher income patients.[6]

Why Health IT?

Health information technology allows comprehensive management of medical information and its secure exchange between health care consumers and providers. Broad use of Health IT has the potential to improve individual patient care in numerous ways, including[6]:

1) Health IT allows instant, complete, accurate, and searchable health information, available at the point of diagnosis and care, allowing for more informed decision making and reducing unnecessary or repetitive tests or procedures.

2) Health IT fosters earlier diagnosis and characterization of disease, improving health outcomes and reducing costs. The money saved could be as much as $142-371 billion/year nationally.

3) Health It will reduce medical errors through an improved understanding of each patient's particular medical history and potential for interactions between drugs.

4) Health IT fosters coordination of care among caregivers and providers and increased administrative efficiency

5) Health IT will help consumers take responsibility for managing their own health through patient education, engagement and activation for individual self-management. This could lead to an overall improvement in population health and public health surveillance.

6) Health IT will enhance privacy through easier tracking and monitoring of who has seen/changed records for accountability. Patients will be able to review/comment on records they now rarely see.

Current Risks Involved

1) loss of information

2) inaccurate information

3) inappropriate release

4) sale of data for commercial purposes

The widespread adoption of Health IT raises many ethical issues systems must address the potential for breaches, data-mining, misuse of sensitive personal data, which could undermine consumer confidence vital to Health IT success. If patients are not confident about the security of their sensitive records, or to avoid embarrassment or discrimination, patients may withhold information or forego treatment.[7]

Connecticut's Health IT efforts

eHealthConnecticut is a non-profit organization incorporated in January 2006 to create, champion and sustain a secure statewide health information exchange (HIE) that will dramatically improve the quality, safety, and efficiency of health care in Connecticut.

eHealthCT is creating a pilot health information exchange for CT Medicaid members that will allow providers to access health records, history, test results, treating providers, prescriptions, etc.

electronically saving time and money while improving quality and reducing errors. Protecting patients' privacy and the security of data is paramount.

Status of eHealth

-Connecticut has secured federal grants to train providers in the use of Health IT and to create a statewide health information exchange network

-Rare piece of health reform that virtually everyone agrees on regardless of party or philosophy

-Lots of good people working on it now

-Clear understanding of need to protect privacy

-Broad recognition that consumers need to be at the table, are welcomed

-Extensive work has been done and will continue to be done to ensure that electronic medical record systems are secure

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 [1] Institute of Medicine. "Review of the Adoption and Implementation of Health IT Standards by the DHHS Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology." http://www.iom.edu/Activities/Workforce/HealthITStandards.aspx

 [2] Sask, Regina. "Experiences from the Forefront of EMR Use." Canada Info Healthway, 2009

[3] First eHealth Consumer Privacy Forum. Connecticut Health Policy Project, 2009

[4]Health Information Technology, National Partnership for Women and Families, http://www.nationalpartnership.org/site/PageServer?pagename=issues_health_hit

[5] Institute of Medicine. "To Err is Human: Building A Safer Health System." November 1,1999

[6] Presentation made to the eHealth Privacy and Security Consumer Forum. "eHealth: Why Consumers Should Care." CT Health Policy Project, April 2009

[7] Presentation made to the eHealth Privacy and Security Consumer Forum. "eHealth Privacy & Security." AARP CT, April 2009