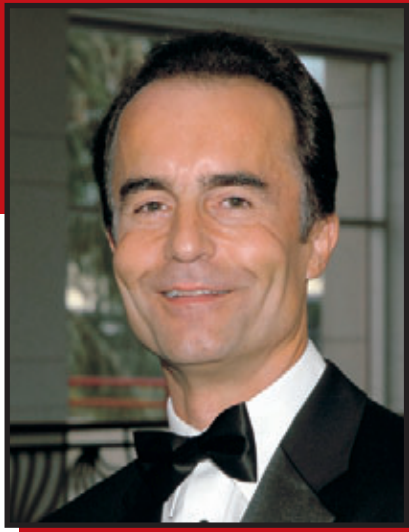


TECHNOLOGY



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Medical Information Technology

Your Monthly IT Guide since 1995!

The Health IT Stimulus Money Is Here How Do You Get The Most Out Of It?

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), aka the “stimulus” package, enacted in February 2009, has been widely criticized by many as another poorly designed and wasteful government spending plan. But do you know that \$1 in every \$5 in spending that ARRA authorized went toward the health sector in some fashion?

Currently, only 6 percent of physicians and 2 percent of hospitals use fully integrated electronic health records. Therefore, Congress and the Obama administration decided that financial incentives might provide a significant boost. Simply stated the goals of health IT applications are threefold: improve quality of care, optimize outcome of medical services rendered and reduce costs. The entire investment in health information technology will amount to \$29 billion through 2016 and it depends on our motivation and participation to make every dollar count! The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has already captured more than \$3 billion in net benefits from its health IT investments.

However, many critics are challenging the health IT efforts.

Naturally, there is plenty of pushback from hospitals and physicians arguing they are being asked to do too much with health IT too soon. This argument surprises me because the same critics are quick to embrace new technologies and procedures, which can pad their rapidly shrinking profit margins. Payment and reimbursement incentives will hopefully convince those critics to get on board too.

Others argue that we need to first develop standards for data collection and exchange. Such standards will be central to having IT systems that can share information with each other as well as aggregate population-level data that ultimately could be used to advance public health. True, but have we stopped manufacturing a wide variety of cars because we have to develop safety and performance standards first? Of course not! We already have more than 200 EHR vendors offering a plethora of products. The developments of data exchange standards will go hand in hand with the release of EHR products, which have to adapt to the emerging standards.

Furthermore, many point out that there are not enough skilled office staff available to use these sophisticated programs and that physicians are challenged to use computers in the exam room.

They are correct!

Claire Dixon-Lee, Executive Director of the Commission on Accreditation for Health Informatics and Information Management

Education, said a 2009 work force study projected that there will be a need for anywhere between 12,000 and 50,000 new health IT professionals over the next eight years. The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that the health care industry will need an additional 35,000 health IT workers, or a 20% increase in the current work force. This is the reason why dozens of universities and community colleges have applied for and received ONC (Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology) grants to create health IT job-training programs. These universities and colleges are ramping up these programs for the upcoming fall semester. The ONC grants aim to help 70 community colleges implement six-month certificate programs in health IT. Officials expect the programs to train 10,500 students annually over five years. For physicians the American Medical Informatics Association (AHIMA) is creating a board certification program for physicians in medical informatics that aims to begin credentialing in 2013. In addition, AHIMA is supporting the development of a Virtual Lab for EHRs, which will provide online course work to more than 125 health information management degree programs. Earlier this year, the federal government awarded nearly \$1 billion in grants to 60 Regional Extension Centers (RECs) and charged them to help primary care physicians to select and implement electronic health records (EHRs). With the help of local regional extension centers physicians will move towards the adoption of EHRs within two years to enhance patient care and the efficiency of their practices.

The South Florida Regional Extension Center is currently enrolling healthcare professionals and anyone interested can sign-up for the program today at <http://www.southfloridarec.org> <<http://www.southfloridarec.org/>>. Naturally, we have to overcome obstacles and hurdles along the way. But if we are willing to learn, to work together with other physicians and ready to share our experiences, then we can achieve these ambitious goals. We can all transform the practice of medicine and improve the quality of life of our patients and our professional satisfaction. So what are you waiting for?

I look forward to reading your comments and suggestions on our blog at:

<http://miamimedblog.blogspot.com/>

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Disclosure: The author is a practicing family physician, addiction specialist and computer consultant. In addition, he is a founder and managing partner of a medical IT company and a member of the SFREC Steering Committee.