



TECHNOLOGY

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Medical Information Technology

Using the Power of Information Technology to Transform Health and Care

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On April 27, 2004, President Bush issued Executive Order (EO) 13335 "to provide leadership for the development and nationwide implementation of an interoperable health information technology infrastructure to improve the quality and efficiency of health care," establishing the position of a National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (IT) within the Office of the Secretary of Health and Human Services.

Since 2004 the Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT (ONC) continues to advance the national health IT agenda to achieve the set goal for the majority of Americans to have access to electronic health records (EHRs) by 2014. Robert M. Kolodner, MD, the current National Coordinator for Health Information Technology, introduced the ONC - Coordinated Federal Health Information Technology 2008-2012 Strategic Plan, which includes the following goals: Patient-focused Health Care and Population Health.

Patient-focused Health Care should enable the transformation to higher quality, more cost-efficient, patient-focused health care through electronic health information access and use by care providers, and by patients and their designees.

Population Health Initiatives are intended to enable the appropriate, authorized, and timely access and use of electronic health information to benefit public health, biomedical research, quality improvement, and emergency preparedness.

The Plan articulates strategies that describe the work needed to achieve each objective. As a group, the strategies are characterized by:

- Commitment to the engagement of multiple stakeholders across the public and private sectors;
- Concern for reliability, confidentiality, privacy, and security when exchanging, storing, and using electronic health information; and
- Focus on the consumer of health care as a critical participant in achieving the two overarching goals of the Plan.

Over time, as information begins to move among Electronic Health Records (EHRs) and Personal Health records (PHRs), individuals will connect with their clinicians, clinicians will connect with other care providers, and health-related communities will connect with each other to enable the improvements in health and care that everyone wants. As these connections are made, the Nationwide Health Information Network, or NHIN, will evolve fully and provide communities across the entire nation with the ability to securely exchange electronic health information.

EHRs and PHRs will be the key technologies over the next several years to enable this transformation in health and care. The outcomes anticipated as a part of the health IT architecture will allow authorized access to comprehensive individual health information for patient care, consumer self-management of health, and a wide range of research, quality, emergency response, and public health initiatives. Beyond these health IT tools, the health IT architecture requires health information exchange networks to support secure and reliable information exchange within and across communities. Both the tools and the network must use recognized interoperability standards to make this work.

Malcolm Gladwell, renowned author of *The Tipping Point*, explained the tipping point as the "level for which the momentum for change becomes unstoppable." As with any new technology, truly widespread use of health IT will not occur immediately. Adoption of health IT among physicians is slowly rising – from 10 percent in 2005 to 14 percent in 2007. In 2009, the first set of health information exchanges will share real data, in real time, through the NHIN. As all of the health IT initiatives that are underway grow and continue to produce results, there will be a shift in how individuals interact with the health care system. The processes currently underway will enable the technology – products and networks – to advance far enough to make the vision of a nationwide health IT architecture a reality. However, this effort is not just about technology. It is about a change in the way the nation views health and care.

Our nation will approach the tipping point during the timeframe of this Plan. While continuing work will be needed to fully embrace health IT throughout the United States, our nation will see a rapid acceleration in the use of interoperable health IT and, in time, individuals will have access to their health information – anywhere, anytime.

Physician organizations need to play an active role in the implementation of this ambitious plan. The Dade County Medical Association is developing collaborative relationships with several technology partners to assist physicians in South Florida to implement medical information technology solutions.

Disclosure: The author is a practicing family physician, addiction specialist and computer consultant.

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