

The Washington Times

Electronic Health Records

By: Donald Blanchon
Washington Times
September 16, 2008

Congress - just like families across the country - is looking for ways to save money while simultaneously expanding resources. Of course, budget cuts are non-starters in election years, so Congress must look to more innovative ideas to save taxpayer dollars this fiscal year. One idea, long overdue, is to encourage a public and private partnership to move toward digitized health records. A study by the Rand Corporation estimated that electronic medical records, health IT as it's known, could save Americans \$81 billion a year.

That number, from such a respected source, demands further investigation. But when you think about it, the most reasonable response to health IT proposals is, "Wait, we're not doing that already?" In most cases, no. The health-care industry has lagged behind the rest of the economy in digitizing records. Though this technology does better serve everyone - including the under- and un-insured population - many hospitals, clinics, and health centers lack the funds to implement health IT systems. An unfortunate fact since right now, 20 percent of medical tests ordered every year are repeat tests because the results of the first tests were lost. And nearly 100,000 patients die every year due to medical errors. This is not a criticism of the dedicated doctors and nurses who take care of us. It's simply recognition that people in all industries make mistakes and that, as we know, slip-ups made in hospitals are more life-threatening than those made in accounting offices and coffee shops. It seems surprising that Congress has not taken the lead to move our health-care system toward health IT, by passing legislation this year to encourage investment and participation in it. Perhaps it is because, as with all great ideas, there are concerns.

One concern often raised is privacy. Many see paper - "hard copies" - as more secure than digital records. If that presumption was ever true, it certainly no longer is. Health IT will not only cut down on paper - thus saving money - but also will cut down on unwarranted and illegal reviewing of medical files. In a paper-based system, anyone can simply open a file cabinet and read a patient's medical history without any accountability or even the patient's knowledge. Secure health IT systems include automatic audit tracking, monitoring who is viewing your medical files, as well as when and where. It even tracks failed attempts to download files.

Like other fields, the digitization of records will all but eliminate problems caused by, among other things, trying to read a stranger's handwriting. It will cut down on overhead,

forms and even insurance premiums for our doctors. It will save time, which, when it comes to health care, patients and doctors can agree is even more valuable than money.

Electronic medical records also expand the capabilities of specialty community clinics, focusing on diseases such as HIV/AIDS, allowing them to identify population health trends earlier, provide enhanced continuum of care and monitor compliance of treatment.

We waste tens of billions of dollars every year on duplicative files, questionnaires, histories, referrals and visits. Medicare and Medicaid alone are rife with the waste, fraud and abuse of its record-keeping systems. Despite research and awareness programs, early identification of detrimental health trends and treatment compliance remain elusive. By passing health IT legislation this year, even with the distractions of an election, Congress will send a strong message to the entire country that it is looking for ways to stretch our dollars. Health IT will save lives, save money, improve research and treatment and protect our privacy better than the current paper-based system.

Congress still has time to act, and, as if in another waiting room, we're all waiting. Patiently.

Donald Blanchon is the Chief Executive Officer of the Whitman Walker Clinic, a non-profit, community-based provider of health care and social services to people living with HIV/AIDS in the Washington D.C. area.