

Editorial/Opinion

Admitting electronic data to the hospital

Barbara Archbold

RESEARCH TRIANGLE PARK--Health care budgets are stretched to the breaking point. Health care workers are in short supply. And health care costs are skyrocketing because of factors such as government policy, market forces and aging populations. Public and private care providers, as well as health plans, are under unprecedented financial pressures.

But a new approach to health care offers a solution. Integrating technology into patient records, research and billing can form the foundation for a patient-centric approach.

This means digitizing data and making it instantaneously and securely accessible anywhere, anytime. So far only 25 percent of U.S. hospitals are modernizing health care through electronic health systems. Fortunately, in the Triangle we are part of this historic shift in medicine.

This year the more than 7,000 caregivers at the UNC Health Care System became linked through an electronic health record system. This has replaced the paper charts for nearly 1 million patients annually. On-call providers can even use Web-enabled PDAs and smart phones to access patient data to make the most informed decisions.

At Duke University Medical Center, more than 2,000 staff members are working through secure, coordinated medical records workstations. The system makes it easier for doctors at Duke's three hospitals to update patient records, order medications and lab reports and conduct CAT scans and MRIs.

Newfound flexibility allows doctors and nurses to focus greater attention on the patient and to make better decisions more quickly, providing better care and reducing errors.

According to a report from the Institute of Medicine, medication errors are the most common health care errors, harming at least 1.5 million people annually at the cost of \$3.5 billion a year. Preventable medical errors kill up to 98,000 Americans each year. Applying new technologies such as electronic health records can reduce those errors while lowering costs -- an estimated \$150 billion in administrative waste and \$300 billion lost to unnecessary testing.

Another innovative solution is e-prescribing. A pilot program was introduced in Raleigh this year by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of N.C. Through a secure system doctors can transfer data directly to pharmacies. The goal is to catch potentially harmful issues like drug allergies and to eliminate misinterpreted prescriptions.

Developing universally available new technologies is essential to improving the efficiency of the health care system and the patient experience.

And as we move forward, the security of personal and health information is of utmost importance. Governments must continue to address the unique concerns centered around privacy in legislation to prevent unauthorized access of personal data.

As security concerns are met, health institutions must realize that the costs and learning curve involved in new technology are worth it. The ultimate goal is to have all health systems linked, throughout the country. The federal government has even set a year, 2014, for all Americans to have privacy-protected electronic medical records.

By working together -- the health care industry, technology companies and lawmakers -- it will be possible to unlock a new model of care within the next decade. Now is the time to share progress, challenges and best practices to reduce medical errors and deliver the quality of care all patients deserve.

(Barbara Archbold is a health care executive at **IBM** Global Business Services in Research Triangle Park. She is also a board member of the N.C. Healthcare Information and Communications Alliance (NCHICA), which is based in RTP.)

Document RNOB000020061214e2ce00014

© 2006 Dow Jones Reuters Business Interactive LLC (trading as Factiva) All rights reserved.