



MANAGED CARE

OUTLOOK

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Everyone Has a Role in Making the Health Care System a Little More Connected

A little over a year ago, Misys Healthcare Systems announced the launch of its Center for Community Health Leadership. One of the primary goals of the Center is to drive the advancement of an interoperable health care system through shared knowledge and best practices in health care information technology (IT) in order to reduce unnecessary health care costs and improve the quality of care.

The Center recently announced the appointment of Archelle Georgiou, MD, to its advisory board. Dr. Georgiou is executive vice president of strategic relations for UnitedHealth Group's

OptumHealth business and plays a key role in the Center's mission to promote adoption of electronic health records (EHRs) in selected local communities where this technology will be installed and piloted.

"When we think about the key components of how to broaden use of health information technology, there are several key ways to accomplish this," explains Georgiou. "One way is through data standards. Without data standards, every single system will talk only to itself, and we won't get the value out of the investment, the technology, and the improvements in health care that we would otherwise see if we had data standards."

The activity underway at the federal government level is the type of leadership needed to bring data standards into place so that the system of health information technology can be interoperable and can be leveraged to improve care, notes Georgiou. The efforts currently underway to bring standards to the table simply cannot happen fast enough, she adds.

Second, it is important to understand how to build technology that makes the health care system more efficient. This technology needs to make the system faster, better, and cheaper. It needs to acknowledge how hospitals operate, how physicians practice, and how consumers want to access health care.

"How we build the technology needs to reflect how we really want our health care system to operate," says Georgiou. "I think that's a really key point. Technology is not the end point; it is simply an enabler. We need to step back and think about how we can create a more efficient, easy-to-use health care system and build technology that helps support that as opposed to letting technology drive how we deliver care."

The third piece of the puzzle is figuring out the business model for installing health information technology across communities, notes Georgiou.

“As I understand it, the business case is the biggest barrier that physicians have for putting electronic medical records into their offices,” says Georgiou. “I think we need to understand the economics and the financial elements of how to make this an endeavor that is a win-win for the whole system or the entire community — all the way from the physicians in the hospital to the consumers.”

There has to be a value proposition for everyone, and there needs to be a way to make the technology engaging and a part of how everybody interacts with the health care system.

“That’s a pretty global view of what we need, but you have to start with the big picture in order to be successful in putting health information technology in place,” adds Georgiou.

UnitedHealth Group, like so many organizations, has a number of health information technology initiatives in place. One such initiative involves the use of personal health records.

“UnitedHealth Group has made personal health records available to about 24 million commercial members,” notes Georgiou. “We have a broader membership base than that, but for 24 million commercial members, we have personal health records that are available online, 24 hours a day, seven days a week through myuhc.com.”

UnitedHealth Group currently pre-populates each individual’s personal health record with information about his or her medical conditions, surgical history, prescription history, laboratory tests, radiology tests, and other procedures. This information is based on two years of administrative claims data that the company has in its data warehouse. Members can augment their records and add information such as family history and allergies or other personal health habits that should be tracked.

“We think it is very important not only for doctors and hospitals in a community to be

connected with health information technology but also consumers so that they can be in the loop when it comes to their health care and they can take personal accountability for their own health,” says Georgiou.

Even consumers that are not insured by UnitedHealth have access to a personal health record.

“We think personal health records are important for all Americans, regardless of whether they are a UnitedHealthcare member,” says Georgiou. “We make a personal health record available to any individual by going to www.healthatoz.com. Any individual, insured by us or not, can go to healthatoz.com and do everything from completing a health risk assessment to building their personal health record to accessing health education and information to having real-time, live chats with a nurse for free. That tool is available to every American.”

Decreased Costs

In addition to improving the overall efficiency of health care, the use of health information technology, personal health records, and electronic health records can also decrease costs and improve care, says Georgiou.

First, health information technology can potentially eliminate duplicate health care services. Take the example of a gastroenterologist who sees a patient from an outlying area with symptoms indicating the need for a colonoscopy.

When asked whether or not they have had a colonoscopy in the last year or two, some patients simply cannot remember. Since the physician needs to make a diagnosis and treat the patient and does not know for sure if the test has been done recently, the physician often decides to do the test (which in some cases means the test is being repeated).

This example not only happens in gastroenterology. It happens in cardiology and all across specialties. It can be something as invasive and

uncomfortable as a colonoscopy or something as simple as a laboratory test.

“If you have personal health records, or there is an electronic health record available, the doctor can have that information at their fingertips, see that it was done, know *where* it was done, and quickly retrieve the information,” notes Georgiou.

As a result, one important yet simple way to decrease costs is by decreasing duplication of services that would otherwise be unnecessary.

Health information technology also improves patient safety, says Georgiou. Take, for instance, a situation in which there are two similar medications being prescribed by two different physicians in different practices. In the absence of health information technology, each doctor may be unaware that the patient is receiving duplicate prescriptions.

Finally, health information technology keeps their personal health information safe and secure. Paper records are not protected from theft, fire, or natural disasters. This became very evident when thousands of individuals lost their medical records during Hurricane Katrina.

“We cannot move fast enough to connect the health care system,” says Georgiou. “Besides improving care and safety and decreasing cost, the bottom line is that a connected health care system will help make it simpler for people to get the care they need, when they need it — a benefit that we all would like to experience.” ■