

Federal Health Tech Plan Focuses on EHR Adoption

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If the feds have it their way, 40% of physician offices will use certified electronic health records by 2012 as part of a strategic plan for coordinating the federal government's health IT efforts over the next 4 years.

About 14% of physicians had adopted some form of health information technology (IT) by 2007, according to the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology, which released the strategic plan. Specifically, the plan calls for removing business barriers and disincentives for adoption of electronic health records (EHRs) and providing training and technical assistance.

For example, the plan says that by next year information on low-cost and effective provider support on EHR adoption should be available online.

The plan also calls for increasing the health IT workforce by training more standards developers, ensuring vendors are trained in the implementation of health IT tools, and training physicians and other health care providers in informatics.

It also highlights the need to address physician concerns about liability risks related to the exchange of electronic health information.

In addition to issues related to adoption, the plan lays out goals for achieving patient-focused health care through electronic health record access, and enabling the use of electronic health data to benefit public health, research, and emergency preparedness.

"[The plan] establishes the next generation of health IT milestones to harness the power of information technology to help transform health and care in this country," Dr. Robert Kolodner, national coordinator for health information technology, said in a statement.

The goals are all positive, said Dr. Steven Waldren, director of the Center for Health Information Technology at the American Academy of Family Physicians, but the plan does not place enough emphasis on the need to provide financial incentives to physicians for purchasing and using electronic health record systems, he said.

"The real bottom line is getting the payment reform that is needed in health care today," Dr. Waldren said.

The strategic plan represents a "reasonable approach"

going forward and gives a sense of how to achieve the President's objective of greater access to EHRs, commented Dan Rode, vice president of policy and government relations at the American Health Information Management Association.

However, many of the items don't have specific timetables for completion but will instead be reassessed in 2010, he said, leaving a lot to be accomplished before 2014.

And while the plan outlines the objectives envisioned by the current administration, the goals and strategies could change with a new president who may be proposing changes to the way health care is delivered, Mr. Rode said.

The plan was developed by the Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT in collaboration with 12 agencies within the Department of Health and Human Services, along with the departments of Commerce, Defense, and Veterans Affairs, and the Federal Communications Commission. The National Committee on Vital Statistics and the American Health Information Community also contributed to the plan. ■

The strategic plan is available at www.hhs.gov/healthit

Google, Microsoft Launch Personal Health Records Database

BY ERIK GOLDMAN

Contributing Writer

WASHINGTON — Search engine giant Google has joined software giant Microsoft in an attempt to revolutionize health care information technology, one patient at a time.

Google launched Google Health this spring with an aim of establishing itself as the leading repository of personal health records (PHR). Google is also positioning itself as a primary clearinghouse for clinical information, self-care tools, and provider ratings to help patients make educated health care decisions.

Google Health emerged just as the smoke began to clear from Microsoft's launch of its own HealthVault PHR platform last fall.

Acting on their view of individual patients, not health care systems, as the primary locus of change for health care information technology, both companies provide individuals with secure, user-friendly systems for aggregating all of their health care records, data, diagnostic images, laboratory results, and medical histories. They hope to put an end to the fragmentation, duplication, and lack of portability that characterize paper-based health record keeping.

Executives at both HealthVault and Google Health said that they believe digitally enabled patients will help push more doctors to implement electronic health records systems in their offices.

Todd Wiseman, head of Google's Federal Enterprise Team, says the creation of Google Health was a natural move. "We now have more than 1 billion people worldwide using Google every day. Google is the No. 1 search engine for health information, and health topics are a top search category for Google," he said at the fifth annual World Health Care Congress.

Google Health can automatically import physician reports, prescription history, and lab results. Eventually, it will enable people to schedule appointments, refill

prescriptions, and employ personal health and wellness tools, Mr. Wiseman said.

"We don't have any plans for ads within the Google Health product," Mr. Wiseman said. "We see it as a way to drive more Google search traffic." The search returns, of course, will arrive with ads and sponsored placements (just like every Google search), but he stressed that the PHR side of things will remain free of commercials.

Google is currently running a pilot field test of the Google Health system in partnership with the Cleveland Clinic. "We're 2 months into that, and we have 1,600 Cleveland Clinic patients storing their PHRs right now. This will go up to about 10,000. We're testing the process of data sharing in a live clinical-care delivery setting, with real patients and real doctors. The goal is simply proof of concept."

Mr. Wiseman pointed out that Google has significant advantages over other companies vying for a piece of the evolving PHR market. For one, the company is wholly independent and not tethered to any health care plan or provider system, so a Google Health PHR is completely portable. Users would be able to access their records even if they change health plans, jobs, or even countries.

Mr. Wiseman stressed that, as a company, Google is a neutral stakeholder as far as how someone uses his or her PHR, which is different from PHR systems tied to specific health plans. "We stand by the user and the user only."

Google has one more major advantage: massive data storage capacity.

"We can store and manage a lot of data," Mr. Wiseman said, noting that Google already gives its Gmail users six gigabytes of e-mail storage capacity. "That's a lot. And when you think about storing x-rays, MRIs, and other things like that, there will be a big need for memory."

Google Health essentially is head-on competition for Microsoft's HealthVault, which has been up and running since last fall. While Microsoft has been involved in



HealthVault and Google Health aim to make consumers agents of change.

health care IT solutions for hospitals and health plans for more than a decade, its PHR efforts are fairly new, said George Scriban, senior product manager for HealthVault.

In an interview, Mr. Scriban said HealthVault, which is also free to consumers, tries to solve one of the most frustrating health issues for ordinary people: fragmentation. "Fragmentation of delivery of care has a lot to do with fragmentation of someone's health care identity. Everybody's health care identity is spread around in little slices in different sectors. The employer has some information, various doctors have others, hospitals and payers and pharmacies have still others. The ideal is to have all one's information presentable and portable and useful to any and all providers," Mr. Scriban said.

Essentially, HealthVault is a consumer-controlled hub for gathering and controlling information from various sectors of a person's "health care ecosystem."

Mr. Scriban said that he understands that some physicians get nervous at the thought of patients in control of their own medical records. But he believes that systems like HealthVault and Google Health are really just systematizing what already happens informally.

"When a patient gets a referral from one doctor to another, it is really that patient

who acts as an information transporter, telling the new doctor his or her medical history, medication use, and in some cases actually transferring paper records," he said.

HealthVault tries to standardize, stabilize, and formalize that process, and Mr. Scriban contends that this will reduce errors, prevent loss of important information, eliminate redundancy, and give physicians a fuller picture of their patients' health. He added that HealthVault is being designed to interface with many different electronic health records systems. He said that he hopes that as more patients create PHRs, more doctors will see the ultimate value in interconnectivity.

Microsoft is primarily focused on enabling people to manage their health information, and less engaged in providing self-care tools, something that Google is pursuing, Mr. Scriban said.

Both Google and Microsoft are actively engaged in lining up partners across the health care landscape, including insurers and managed care plans, information service providers, medical organizations, and patient advocacy groups.

Microsoft recently partnered with Kaiser Permanente, an integrated health plan with more than 8 million members, to test the transfer of data from Kaiser's personal health record into HealthVault. The pilot project, launched last month, is open to Kaiser's 159,000 employees. The idea is to combine the clinical data entered by Kaiser physicians, which are available in the Kaiser personal health record, with patient-entered health information and clinical information from providers outside of the Kaiser system. "Providing new ways to manage their health online is one more way we can engage consumers in their care," Anna-Lisa Silvestre, vice president of online services at Kaiser Permanente, said in a statement. "We believe that Microsoft HealthVault will be a valuable supplement to our expanding set of online features."

Kaiser officials plan to re-evaluate the pilot later in the year before expanding it to Kaiser members. ■