

Privacy Is Top Priority for Personal Health Records

BY MARY ELLEN SCHNEIDER
New York Bureau

Privacy should be the top priority when developing certification criteria for personal health records, a task force created by the Certification Commission for Healthcare Information Technology has recommended.

Adequate security and interoperability also must be included in certification efforts, according to the task force.

The Certification Commission for Healthcare Information Technology (CCHIT) will use these recommendations as it prepares to begin certifying personal health records (PHRs) next summer.

Since the PHR field is still “rapidly evolving,” the task force said that certification requirements should not be so prescriptive that they interfere with the progress of the technology.

Offering certification for personal health records platforms and applications could help spur consumer acceptance and adoption of PHRs.

The task force recommended that the voluntary certification process should apply to any products or services that collect, receive, store, or use health information provided by consumers.

Certification should also apply to those products or services that transmit or disclose to a third party any personal health information.

This would allow the CCHIT to offer certification to a range of products and applications, from those that offer a personal health records application and connectivity as an accessory to an electronic health records system, to stand-alone personal health records.

CCHIT hopes that, just as it did in the EHR field, certification will create a floor of functionality, security, and interoperability, said Dr. Paul Tang, cochair of the PHR Advisory Task Force and vice president and chief medical information officer for the Palo Alto (Calif.) Medical

Foundation. The task force called for requirements to maintain privacy in monitoring and enforcement, and for consumer protection that would allow patients to remove their data if certification is revoked.

The group also recommended that standards-based criteria be developed that would require personal health records to send and receive data from as many potential data sources as possible, including ambulatory electronic health records, hospital electronic health records, labs, and networks.

If done right, certification would have significant benefits for both physicians and patients, Dr. Tang said.

A personal health record could provide physicians with better access to secure, authenticated data that could help them make decisions, while patients would have more control over their own care, he said.

“The physician benefits by what benefits the patient,” Dr. Tang said.

In July, the task force made its recommendations and handed over responsibility for PHR certification to a CCHIT work group.

That work group will develop the actual certification criteria that will be used to test PHR products starting next July, according to Dr. Jody Pettit, strategic leader for CCHIT’s PHR work group.

Offering certification for PHR platforms and applications could help spur consumer acceptance and adoption of PHRs, Dr. Pettit said.

“The consumer wouldn’t feel so far out on a limb in terms of putting in their data,” she commented. ■

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THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

Revering the Work of Physician Writers

Well before he attended medical school at Columbia University, New York, Dr. Daniel C. Bryant had been captivated by reading and writing, underscored by an undergraduate degree in French literature that he earned from Princeton (N.J.) University in 1961.

In the 1980s, he began to notice that scores of physicians both past and present had written books on nonmedical topics, so he started combing through reference books and secondhand book shops to collect them in earnest.

“The original motivation to collect these books was a combination of my own interest in writing and vicarious writing in a way,” explained Dr. Bryant, who practiced internal medicine for 28 years in Portland, Maine, before retiring in 1999. “But also it occurred to me in my practice that doctors are so privileged in their access to human experience. They generally have such wonderful educations and wonderful opportunities to see all sorts of people and to travel and to have cultural experiences. They are the ideal people, it seemed to me, to comment on human experience.”

Names of physician writers such as Dr. William Carlos Williams (1883-1963), a pediatrician and poet, came to mind right away, Dr. Bryant said. To locate nonmedical works by other physicians, he tapped into a number of sources, including the reference guide “Contemporary Authors”; “Poetry and the Doctors” by Charles L. Dana (Woodstock, N.Y.: The Elm Tree Press, 1916); and “Literature and Medicine: An Annotated Bibliography” by Joanne Trautmann and Carol Pollard (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982); as well as secondhand book shops in the United States and abroad.

During occasional trips to England with his wife, he located many books in Hay-on-Wye in Wales, which is “just a village in Wales, but it’s almost entirely book shops,” Dr. Bryant said. “We would often spend a few days there, and I’d get a backpack full of books.”

Before the Internet was available, “the only way to really find out who had what books was through catalogues,” he said. “I was on the mailing list of many secondhand book shops. I’d get these lists in the mail and spend a few hours a week going through them.”

Favorite books he collected include Dr. William Carlos Williams’s first editions and “The Silver River” (out of print, 1938), the first book by Dr. Alex Comfort, who is perhaps best known for “The Joy of Sex” (New York: Crown 1972).

Dr. Bryant also became a fan of the poet Dannie Abse, a radiologist in Wales who writes poetry and plays, and has penned five novels. “He did incorporate his medical experience into his work somewhat,” Dr. Bryant said. “He represents what I was hoping to find: using the medical experience as a window into the bigger human experience and commenting on human experience as a doctor.”

By 2004, his collection grew to more



Dr. Daniel C. Bryant donated his collection of physician-penned books to New York University’s Ehrman Medical Library.

than 1,100 physician-penned books, so he donated them to New York University’s Ehrman Medical Library, which established the Bryant Collection of Physician Writers, a permanent collection that is believed to be the largest of its kind (library.med.nyu.edu/library/eresources/featuredcollections/bryant).

“I always liked the idea that physicians have a little bigger perspective and humanistic outlook on things and figured that if these books were in an area where medical students, residents, and staff passed by, they would think about that,” said Dr. Bryant, who lives in Cape Elizabeth, Maine. “I thought that a medical library would be a good place for them.”

Over the course of his 20-plus years of collecting the books, he came to realize that he’s not alone in his high regard for the craft of writing. “I’ve had many e-mails and contacts from doctors who write or

try to write,” said Dr. Bryant, who has published poems and essays in medical journals, written half a dozen short stories for literary magazines, and written crossword puzzles for the New York Times and Los Angeles Times.

“It does seem that a lot of doctors write about medical subjects; there’s a lot of interest in medical thrillers. That seems to be a common theme.”

His interest in collecting more physician-penned books “has waned a bit in the last few years, but occasionally I’ll send a few more to the Erhman Library that I come across.”

He called the avocation “an escape into something that I quite enjoyed. It was my golf, I guess.”

As for the Bryant Collection of Physician Writers, he hopes that “it will be added to, that it will inspire medical students and other medical people to take down a book and look at it or even spur them on to do a little writing themselves.” ■

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau

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