

For electronic medical records, uniform standards now

Contributed by John Castellani
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Every presidential candidate is talking about change, but the new year brings the opportunity for change to anyone who makes a New Year's resolution with the intent to keep it.

Here's a powerful way for Congress to begin 2008: by resolving to pass legislation calling for uniform standards in the adoption of electronic medical records.

Lawmakers should start the new year by focusing on this critical component of healthcare reform that will bring America into a new age of healthcare delivery.

What makes this a perfect New Year's resolution?

• It will save America - and Americans - money. Today we stand on the threshold of a true revolution in American healthcare: the prospect of each of us having a comprehensive, current, portable electronic medical record (EMR).

Historically, most healthcare policy debates have been polarizing, partisan affairs, turning on tradeoffs between cost and quality and coverage. The health IT issue is different: With a projected \$165 billion in annual savings once the infrastructure is in place, we will be able to put coverage and care within the reach of millions of Americans. That cost savings positively impacts both consumers and the businesses that provide coverage to more than 35 million Americans.

And where do those savings come from? They come from the elimination of inefficiencies throughout our system - wasteful and redundant tests and treatment that can actually harm the patient.

They also come from a substantial reduction in medical errors due to incomplete patient histories, a lack of medication data and so forth. So in this instance, cost, quality and coverage go hand-in-hand. And Congress has a rare opportunity to begin a new legislative year by saving money.

• The hard work is already done. Thanks to the hard, bipartisan work of Senate HELP Committee Chairman Ted Kennedy, ranking member Mike Enzi and many others, the legislation has been written and vetted, and stands ready for passage. Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt has formally sought language to make EMR adoption a condition of Medicare and other public-payer reimbursement, and the Kennedy-Enzi bill - which is ready to pass - would wisely apply to the private sector as well.

And it is must-pass: The technology exists today - there are a number of proven systems already operating in the VA and elsewhere. And that's part of the challenge: allowing these systems to proliferate without ensuring their interoperability would create the conditions for a costly yet avoidable pile-up on the health information superhighway.

Where would our commercial air transportation system be without the universal communications protocols that make shared air space possible? Imagine if every bank adopted an electronic funds transfer process without regard to its interoperability with other banks - and without the capacity to ensure it could. In truth, virtually every other sector of our economy has embraced the transformative power of technology, and it shows in our global competitiveness.

According to a recent analysis by the Commonwealth Fund, the United States lags behind other countries by as much as a dozen years in its efforts to implement health IT.

• It has the support to be a success. Public opinion is increasingly embracing the EMR concept and appreciating its potential. According to a Wall Street Journal Online/Harris Interactive poll taken in November, 75 percent of respondents agree that patients could receive better care if doctors and researchers were able to share information more easily

through electronic systems; 63 percent say electronic record sharing could decrease medical errors, and 55 percent would expect a reduction in costs. And on the principal perceived drawback - the issue of privacy - the same poll finds 60 percent saying an EMR's benefits outweigh the risks.

Business Roundtable sees uniform standards and widespread health IT adoption as an absolute must to bring our nation's healthcare policy up to 21st-century standards.

We stand ready to work with our health plans to drive the quickest reasonable implementation of EMRs but can't - not until a nationwide, interoperable health IT infrastructure is in place for the collection, storage, protection and transmission of personal health information.

It begins this leap year with a true leap forward. Winston Churchill said, "The price of greatness is responsibility."

As we start the new year, let's embrace our collective responsibility to get this critical element of health information technology off the legislative calendar and into the lives of every American.

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