

Technological Advances Key to Healthcare Transformation

Advancing Health IT

Government Funding, Technological Advances Transform Healthcare

By [Barbara DePompa](#)

As the nation's leaders grapple with the extent of healthcare reform measures, one thing has become increasingly clear - no matter how far reform measures go, it's unlikely the U.S. will see a transformation in healthcare without the successful implementation of advanced technologies to reduce costs and improve the provision of healthcare services.

As David Blumenthal, M.D. and National Coordinator for Health Information Technology at the Department of Health & Human Services said in a recent speech at a conference of the National Committee on Quality Assurance, making healthcare IT part of the accepted culture for providing healthcare isn't far off. "Medical students today are not likely to accept paper records as the standard for use in their profession, when electronic means of information exchange and recordkeeping already pervade the rest of their lives," he explained.

"To improve the quality of our health care while lowering its cost, we will make immediate investments necessary to ensure that within five years, all of America's medical records are computerized."
– *President Barack Obama, January 2009*

Clearly, leveraging technology will improve decision making and make it quicker and easier for doctors and patients to send/receive records and speed the diagnosis, treatment of illnesses and accuracy of healthcare practices in the coming years. "An evolution is taking place as we move from paper records to electronic ones in parallel with networking the information, or making it 'interoperable,'" said Dr. Robert Wah, Vice President, CSC Government Health Services and Chief Medical Officer NPS – Civil and Health Services Group. Eventually, he continued, "we will be able to use the digital information for population analytics and personalized care."

While the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) is credited with making the key downpayment on healthcare IT's advancement, Wah said, there are many contributing elements to the current growth wave. Health IT will grow at a combined annual growth rate of 11 percent through 2013, according to consulting firm Scientia Advisors. The firm projects health IT will be the fastest growing segment of the \$1 trillion global healthcare market, expanding from \$35 billion in 2008 to more than \$60 billion by 2013.

Transformational Elements

Key technological tools and/or services that will aid the government's healthcare transformation include:

* **Electronic Health Records (EHRs)** – *the conversion from paper to electronic medical records is seen as the crucial first step. Despite the pain involved in adapting EHR into the current workflows of physicians and other healthcare providers, recent surveys indicate 90 percent of doctors who adopted EHR were satisfied. Providers cite the avoidance of adverse drug events and duplicate tests among the key reasons they favor the use of EHRs.*

* **Health Information Exchanges (HIE)** – *the crucial networks that must develop across the country to aid in the exchange of all kinds of medical information, including EHRs. The federal Office of the National Coordinator (ONC) to Health Information Technology has already rolled out funding for every state in increments from \$4 million to \$40 million, to plan for and implement statewide HIEs.*

* **Healthcare analytics tools** – *once information is digitized and networks established, healthcare providers will be able to analyze health data across an array of various populations to facilitate faster diagnosis and treatment. One example of this is in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) National Electronic Disease Surveillance System (NEDSS). CSC helped the CDC integrate data from more than 100 federal, state and local entities. Now the system is used to quickly identify and track infectious diseases and potential bioterrorism attacks. NEDSS also plays a vital role in the investigation of outbreaks and the monitoring of disease trends.*

Each of the key healthcare IT elements produce enormous benefits, from improving individual patient care to

reducing medical costs through the elimination of redundant tests. Providers gain the ability to securely exchange patient information, and can collect reminders of services due to facilitate e-prescribing, to speed prescription fulfillment and further reduce errors. Other important components of the ongoing healthcare transformation include the development of key industry standards for electronic records and the secure exchange of information online. (See related standards article, on page s4 of this special report.)

In the coming year, state and local governments are considered pivotal players. "The states are tasked with playing a key role in securing and coordinating ONC funds, presenting a tremendous opportunity for visibly enhancing health IT and ultimately, patient care," Wah said. Over the past 12 years, CSC has been involved in numerous projects to understand and harmonize local, state and federal regulations and policies. With a health information policy framework used as the starting point for CSC's HIE planning, the company helps government organizations focus on strong local accountability, as well as clear accounting for all disclosures of health information, which can be adapted to support each state's requirements.

The growth of HIEs at the state/local level will likely be among the big stories of 2010. A wave of stimulus funding will kick in later in 2010, providing incentives for physician practices and hospitals able to demonstrate the 'meaningful use' of EHRs. Starting in October 2010, physicians will be able to apply for \$44,000 from Medicare or \$60,000 from Medicaid when they convert from paper to EHR systems.

**"Healthcare improves when the people making decisions on care – physicians and other healthcare providers, as well as patients and their families – have good information."
– Dr. Robert Wah, Vice President, CSC Government Health Services**

Also important will be the advancement of health insurance exchanges. CSC worked with the Commonwealth Health Insurance Connector Authority to establish the nation's first health insurance exchange after Massachusetts enacted its universal coverage law. The authority, governed by an independent board and working closely with commercial payers in the state, worked with CSC to establish a brand separate from state government to help Massachusetts residents shop for coverage under the law. CSC created a separate web portal, www.mahealthconnector.org, in less than six months. Several health reform proposals in Congress were based on the Massachusetts Connector model, calling for federal funding of states that create 'gateways' similar to the Massachusetts model. Integrating health insurance providers into the mix will play an increasingly critical role in ongoing reform over the coming years, Wah said.

On the downside, sources said current stimulus spending may spread funds too thinly across numerous small projects, when it would likely be best to concentrate investments on a few larger implementations that are more likely to gain the traction/visibility that will build momentum to advance healthcare IT nationwide.

It's increasingly clear, however that in the not too distant future, healthcare providers will want to invest in healthcare IT on their own, and electronic health records will become part of daily operational practice. One day soon, "providers won't expect federal subsidies for healthcare IT," Blumenthal said.

Once medical information is migrated from paper to electronic medical records on an interoperable network, digitized information becomes a powerful thing. Healthcare organizations will be able to conduct population analyses and provide more personalized medical care. "There will be an explosion in targeted information for treating patients," Wah explained.

And that kind of information will drive costs down, while simultaneously improving the quality of patient care.

Source: CSC

Barbara DePompa is a freelance writer for 1105 Government Information Group's Custom Media unit. This Snapshot report was commissioned by the Custom Media Group, an independent editorial arm of 1105 Government Information Group. Specific topics are chosen in response to interest from the vendor community; however, sponsors are not guaranteed content contribution or review of content before publication. For more information about 1105 Government Information Group Custom Media, please email us at GIGCustomMedia@1105govinfo.com