The Business Case for HL7

Forecasting the Adoption of Electronic Health Information Sharing

Monday, 27 October 2014 18:17

We've been watching the progress made since the 2009 HITECH Act regarding the implementation of Electronic Health Record (EHR) systems in the U.S. Hospital systems have made a great first start, but efforts have been slow in the level of electronic information sharing across the entire healthcare sector. We still are years away from achieving the standards of interoperability as set forth in the vision of Health Level Seven International (HL7) vision and strategic initiatives for the exchange, integration, sharing and analysis of health data. We'll get there eventually, but it may be a long and winding road ahead.

As the demand increases for organizational efficiencies as well as an improved patient experience, more healthcare organizations will begin finding ways to connect with one another and achieve interoperability. In turn, more and more healthcare providers will begin to see the value of adopting the new standards, and the industry will move toward complete integration.

We would need a crystal ball to make exact predictions as to the time frame of adoption of HL7 standards within the healthcare sector. But since it's nearly Halloween, we thought we'd take our best guess of how we see the industry playing out in the next few years:

100 Percent Adoption of EHR and Meaningful Use

o   Hospitals using at least a basic EHR system will move from a 48.1 percent adoption rate in 20103 (source: National Center for Health Statistics) to a full adoption rate of 100 percent.

o   Government pressure will force adoption of electronic information sharing, with continued incentives as well as increased penalties for issues such as hospital readmissions or errors.

o   EHR becomes the standard of care and all providers comply with meaningful use regulations following its adoption.

Continued Support of Health Information Exchanges among States

o   With states such as Indiana and Massachusetts leading the way with Health Information Exchanges (HIEs), other states will follow suit and begin to develop their own health information exchanges.

o   With the help of health care IT companies, all state healthcare providers will develop widespread use of HIEs.

- Larger hospitals and healthcare organizations with multi-state locations will begin collaborating on ways to develop more tightly interfaced systems, with emphasis on patient information sharing across the entire spectrum of patient care – from health insurers to specialists, pharmacies and vendors.
- Individual healthcare sectors such as vendors, labs, pharmacies, insurance agencies and others with patient information begin participating in state exchanges in order to compete.

Adopting HL7 Integration Engines

- Organizations that have already invested in EHRs will shift focus toward interoperability between systems. These groups will begin investing in the IT infrastructure and the integration of HL7 interface engines to communicate and share information across the organization.
- Technology companies specializing in HL7 integration and applications will play an important role in creating and integrating these new interface engines within the healthcare provider organization.
- Larger hospitals and healthcare organizations will further develop their new interface engines to link and electronically share data with outside vendors and service providers.
- As early adopters start to realize improved efficiencies and lower costs, smaller physician offices and clinics will gradually adopt integration engines, leveraging the efforts and cost-savings put in place by the early adopters.

Development of a Universal Architecture

- Scientific and technological advisors and task forces (possibly with the help of government or state funding) will continue to produce recommendations on the development of a universal language and single architecture for the exchange of health information.
- Individual states will work together toward adopting the new universal architecture, starting with early adopters in the larger health systems. Government officials will put in place incentives and a timeline for eventual adoption by all organizations in all states.
- With support from the government, technology and scientific advisors as well as the HIT Standards committee will use HL7 data types to continually refine a uniform standard mark-up language for healthcare, and continue to improve the universal architecture and interoperability standards.

The industry may be a decade or more away from achieving the goals outlined in the HL7 vision. That's the bad news. But we don't need a crystal ball to tell us that with continued government support, the continued research and development toward a universal language, and industry leaders encouraging participation among all sectors, we will continue to make progress in the quest for interoperability. And that's the good news.