

March 31, 2009

Health Information Security and Privacy Collaboration

Health Information Exchange and Health Information Technology Benefits and Risks

Prepared for

RTI International

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Prepared by

Consumer Education and Engagement Collaborative
Colorado, Georgia, Kansas, Massachusetts, New York,
Oregon, Washington, West Virginia

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1. INTRODUCTION

Health information exchange and health information technology are tools that health care providers and consumers can use to improve health care. As in any other industry, the ability to exchange information electronically comes with benefits and risks. Here are some benefits and risks for you to consider.

2. BENEFITS

2.1 Available in Emergency

If you are in an accident and are unable to explain your health history to health care providers, they can find the information about your medications, health issues, and tests and make informed decisions about your emergency care faster.

2.2 Protected in Disasters

If you are in an area affected by a disaster, like Hurricane Katrina, your health information can be stored safely in electronic form.

2.3 Improved Care/Reduced Medical Errors

Access to information about care you receive elsewhere gives your health care providers a better, more complete picture of your health. That means your health care providers can make sure the care they provide doesn't interact badly with other treatment you may be receiving. For example, when you can't remember what medications you are taking, health information exchange can make information about your conditions and medications available to your health care providers so that they will know the right things to do instead of doing something that might be harmful.

2.4 Tracking for Protection

When your health information is shared electronically, information about access to your record is stored electronically. This can include the identity of those who accessed your record, the date of access, the types of information accessed, and the reason your record was accessed. This makes it easier to enforce laws and regulations governing access when using electronic records than it is with paper records.

2.5 Increased Safety/Reduced Duplication

Because health care providers can see what tests you have had and the results, they don't always have to repeat them. Especially with x-rays and certain lab tests, this means you are at less risk from radiation and other side effects. It also means you pay less for your health care in copayments and deductibles when tests aren't repeated.

3. RISKS

3.1 Identity Theft

Although health information benefits from all the security measures developed in other economic areas such as defense and finance, it has the same risks these other areas have experienced. Identity theft occurs with both paper files and electronic files, but a breach of electronic files may affect more records than a breach of paper files.

3.2 Errors

Health information exchange is a tool to improve care. Just like a paper health record, if the health care provider does not enter the correct information, that information remains in the health record until it is corrected. However, electronic information can provide checks and balances that paper health records cannot.

3.3 Hackers

As long as information technology has existed, there have been efforts to try to break into records of all kinds. Electronic health care information benefits from the security measure developed by other industries. Health care is the last frontier of information technology, so anti-hacking security measures from other economic areas are already used. However, hackers will continue to try to break security codes just like they do in other electronic systems.

There are benefits and risks associated with health information technology and health information exchange. Ask your health care providers if they use health information technology or participate in health information exchange. If you have questions, make sure that you have a conversation about how your doctor protects your health data.