

Experience matters

Health IT 'lessons learned' must inform reform

As Congress and the new administration prepare to include health information technology and other reform elements in economic recovery legislation, it is more important than ever that leaders and clinicians increase their role in the dialogue. It is the "real world tested" experiences of health IT pioneers—not the conceptual models of a limited few—that can best help policymakers formulate a meaningful infrastructure solution.

On a recent trip to Washington during which I met with 10 national policymakers and congressional committee staff, I was struck by a paradox. On the one hand, there seems to be an emerging alignment around the necessary elements of reform. Beyond the coverage and access imperative, it is clear to me that successful reform will include payment reform and comparative effectiveness, both undergirded by a strong health IT infrastructure.

On the other hand, policymakers acknowledge that information about how best to achieve these changes is limited. Often, policy is based on theory without a clear understanding of the practical applications. This is why the voice of our healthcare leadership, whether as individuals or through collective advocacy groups such as the American Hospital Association, is now so vital to the formation of policy.

During my visit, congressional leaders and staff appreciated Trinity Health's experience as a national network of community hospitals with an advanced health IT architecture, because the vast majority of Americans receive care in urban, suburban and rural facilities such as ours. They encouraged me to offer our experiential input on how best to structure health IT solutions in the economic stimulus package and subsequent implementation by HHS.

I shared "lessons learned" attesting to the power of health IT in supporting several essential elements for reform, including more efficient care delivery, comparative effectiveness, care coordination, higher overall quality and reduced costs.

Trinity Health's seven-year effort has connected 22 community hospitals from coast to coast in seven states with an integrated health IT platform of clinical support tools, with nine more hospitals coming online over the next

two years. Health IT has become integral to improving quality and containing costs by uniting information management systems with processes in clinical care, revenue management and enterprise resource planning.

Our success has hinged upon standardization of implementation protocols, data standards and process improvements. Health IT makes it easier to "hard wire" those standards, but the

technology itself has not driven our improvement in clinical outcomes and quality. Health IT is a critical "enabler" that is succeeding because it supports our broader efforts to redesign care and enhance quality.

For instance, since 2003, physicians screened more than 60,000 medication orders following alerts from our electronic health-record system. The outcome has been safer care for patients and a more

efficient operating environment. Other benefits include nurses having more time to attend to patients' physical and emotional needs, emergent medications delivered 40% faster, and a significant reduction in pressure ulcers and falls resulting from standardized electronic checks and risk assessments.

In addition to improvements in safety and productivity, Trinity Health has documented more than \$1 million in annual savings through the standardization of certain drugs. We believe this is only the beginning.

While Trinity Health and other health IT innovators have created a laboratory of experiences, the best way to sustain the momentum is to connect funding to focused outcomes and system change, rather than simply "getting computers installed."

We believe legislation and regulation should:

- Establish explicit care outcomes desired for health IT, using funds to incentivize compliance.
- Tie the receipt of funds to deployment of health IT in accordance with data and process standards, including specific performance levels.
- Reward new adopters to work with care delivery organizations that have successfully implemented health IT, and likewise incentivize experienced providers to expand their innovations and share their expertise with new adopters. <<



Joseph Swedish is president and chief executive officer of Trinity Health, Novi, Mich.