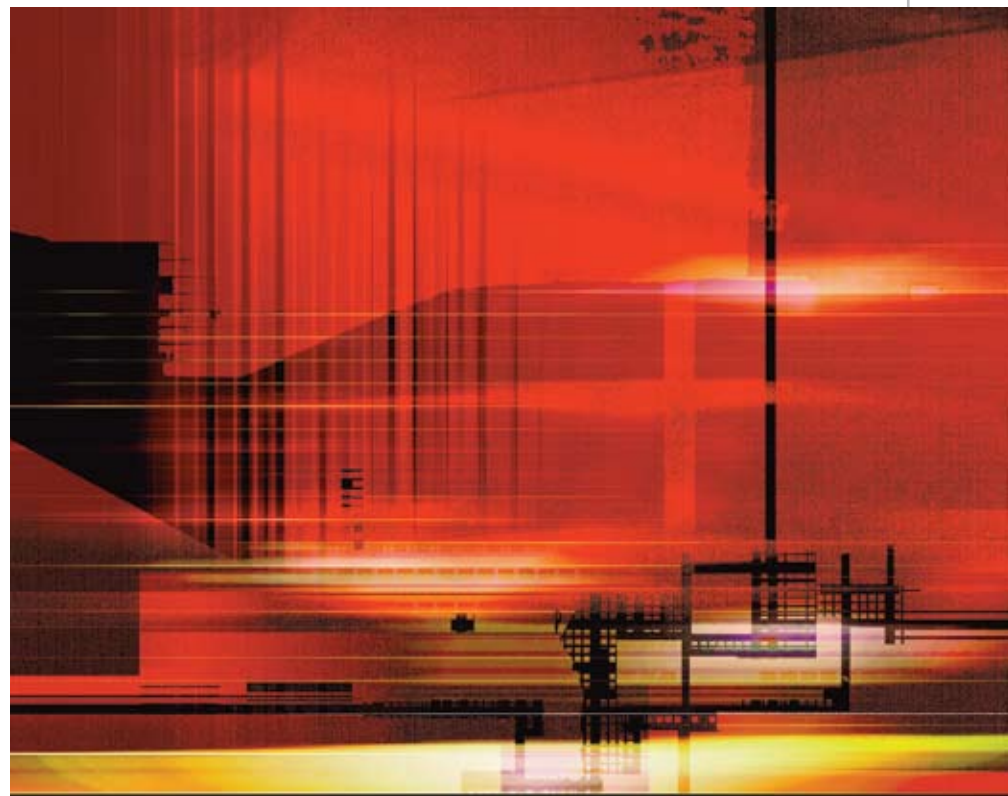


PROVIDERS BULLISH ON HIT

Survey Reveals Surprising Barriers To Adoption

CLARE DENICOLA



Reforming the delivery of health care has become a top issue in the United States today. Organizations, individual providers, and the U.S. government are undertaking meaningful initiatives to promote wellness, access to care, high-quality outcomes, and a financially sound health care system.

A recent survey on health care reform and use of technology revealed that health care practitioners believe that health care reform will improve patient care but are concerned about increased costs to their businesses.

The survey included more than 300 nursing facility and home health care organizations, followed by a series of in-depth interviews with several of these providers.

Providers agree on the goals of health care reform. Survey respondents support the use of health information technology (HIT) to increase the quality of care and improve efficiencies. Some key findings from the survey include:

- Sixty-nine percent say that electronic health records (EHRs) will have a positive impact on their business;
- Seventy-four percent believe a pay-for-performance model will increase the effect on patient outcomes; and
- Many are currently implementing technologies to increase efficiencies in the care process.

Patient Care Drives Adoption

For the vast majority of providers, technology is viewed as an enabler for improv-

ing patient care versus a cost-cutting initiative. They invest in HIT because it makes sense for their businesses and their patients.

The survey asked providers about their strategies for using EHRs, a major focus of health care reform. Many said they do not have an EHR strategy; rather, EHRs are an outgrowth of the patient care initiatives they have under way.

Nearly 70 percent of the respondents indicated that EHRs could have a positive impact on their businesses, largely because they enable long term care organizations to easily capture important patient information and share it within their companies for more coordinated care.

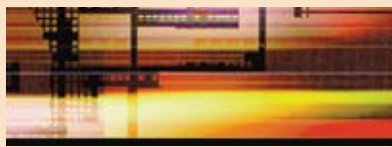
The key is not just implementing software, but also understanding how care is given and making sure the EHR solution enhances the workflow versus adding additional reporting, the survey found.

Reform initiatives and associated underlying technologies must consider how long term care organizations operate businesses on a day-to-day basis—a sentiment that was echoed in the survey.

As one provider said, “When you are digging in the trenches, the details of what, when, and where really matter.” For example, home health care providers conduct patient evaluations in the patient’s home, so they must often transfer notes from a visit into an EHR system after the fact, versus a hospital provider, who may type notes directly into the EHR.

These differences in the way care is delivered need to be understood as new technologies are rolled out, the survey said.

Patient care models need to be better aligned with business models. Return on investment for technology is often not measured in hard dollars, but rather by how much time providers can redirect from administrative tasks toward providing better patient care.



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Unique Needs Present Challenge

For many health care providers, whose expertise is not HIT, investing in new technologies can seem challenging. According to the survey, budget is the biggest barrier to the use of HIT, with

84 percent of those responding indicating budget as the No. 1 challenge.

The current state of the economy has exacerbated this issue, restricting the amount of capital health care that providers can access.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act includes provisions to facilitate the adoption of health care technologies, and billions of dollars have been allotted as incentives for hospitals and providers to implement EHRs. Ironically, 52 percent of those surveyed did not believe the economic stimulus package will successfully encourage providers to adopt new HIT.

Organizations are skeptical about how the government will distribute funds, and many do not believe the amount will cover the costs of implementing EHRs. The large upfront capital outlay is the biggest challenge for long term care organizations.

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Lack of expertise and staffing constraints are the second and third, respectively, most commonly cited barriers to HIT adoption by the long term care providers surveyed.

Several issues are at play here. First, the industry needs to devote more time to addressing the unique business requirements and workflows of long term care organizations.

These organizations must meet an enormously diverse set of patient needs, requiring greater emphasis on technologies that facilitate their particular operational models.

For example, nursing facilities must be able to readily communicate with providers outside their data networks to coordinate care, so having secure, high-speed connectivity to external sources is important.

Investment in tools and resources that educate and inform long term care practitioners about technology best practices is a key component to adoption, respondents said.

Many providers find that changing their underlying business processes and user behavior is critical for successful HIT implementation, yet it can be a major stumbling block if not considered ahead of time.

Some have revised their approaches to mobile devices at the point of care, for example, because the nurses using the devices found the screens or keyboards too small to use.

These are valuable lessons that need to be shared within the long term care community and with lawmakers as they consider how to bring health care reform initiatives down to a more tactical, actionable level.

Wireless Networks Popular

Although health care reform can often seem daunting, long term care practitioners are effectively using technology today to drive tangible benefits for their organizations. To support point-of-care initiatives and enhance the patient living environment, 45 percent of the long

term care organizations surveyed have implemented wireless networks, while 21 percent have specific plans to do so in the next 12 months.

Business continuity to ensure continuous operation and connectivity to remote locations to support broader information sharing is already in place,



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or on the docket, for 73 percent and 58 percent of organizations, respectively. And, long term care organizations seem to prefer using Web-based applications, which are often easier to manage and update and more readily support a remote access model.

Every health care organization should, at a minimum, move from dial-up to secure, high-speed networks. By doing so, practitioners can reap immediate benefits, including faster claims processing for improved cash flow and access to online applications like electronic patient eligibility verification.

Using high-speed Internet connections also positions long term care organizations to better scale their clinical applications over time, including the additions of e-prescribing, home monitoring, and exchanging important patient information with caregivers.

HIE Participation Low

Longer term, the use of EHRs and participation in health information exchanges (HIEs) will be important to providers to generate lasting reform as an industry. These mechanisms provide the real-time data sharing and information transparency platforms providers will need to deliver higher-quality care in a more cost-effective manner.

These technologies also will help providers participate in pay-for-performance initiatives in a manner that their businesses can afford.

Only 16 percent of the long term care organizations surveyed are participating or plan to participate in an HIE today, so more work needs to be done to define the methods and benefits of involvement for the 70 percent who said they would consider joining in the future.

For meaningful health care reform to take hold, long term care practitioners must begin laying the foundation today—implementing high-speed networks and technologies that scale for future growth—while delivering immediate efficiencies that can help fund future technology initiatives.

In turn, the health care industry must define data standards at the provider workflow level to ensure health care information technology is both accessible and usable by the widest range of health care providers possible.

Long term care practitioners are a critical component of health care reform, as the number of patients receiving this type of care grows over the next few years and the need to improve the delivery of health care becomes an imperative.

For a copy of the “Healthcare Provider Survey” results, contact the author at Cecile.Locurto@ivans.com. ■

CLARE DENICOLA is president and chief executive officer for IVANS, a company that supports health care providers with health care connectivity and Medicare solutions.