

Could Health Information Technology Save Your Life?

Imagine that you are one of the 25 million Americans with heart disease. You have been in a car crash. You're unconscious and alone in the ER, suffering from multiple wounds. The ER team is trying to save your life, looking for internal injuries and completing scans. No one knows that you've been to several ERs this year and that, until your last visit for chest pains when a doctor ordered extra tests "just to be safe," the previous visits were dismissed as severe indigestion. No one knows that the results of those extra tests confirmed coronary artery disease and are filed neatly at your cardiologist's office, 50 miles away. No one suspects that you have had a heart attack. Life-saving care is being delayed or missed altogether-which, in this day of information technology is needlessly delayed or missed.

Industries across the world have used information technology to rapidly communicate information, streamline operations, create best practices, reduce costs and improve consumer satisfaction. It's time for health care, one of the largest and fastest growing U.S. industries, to do the same. Alice C. wrote to us from Bethesda, Maryland, with this thought:

My daughter uses her fingerprint to check into the orthodontist. One press and her medical records are ready for the doctor to see. It's great. I don't need to remind anyone about her drug allergies - or remember the details of her last visit. Everything is right there on the computer screen. Why can't it be that way with every doctor? My father takes 10 pills and sees just as many doctors. My sisters and I all try to help my dad - and it's great - but it adds to the confusion. (I can't remember my last tetanus shot, let alone his.) I worry that, one day, one of us will get something really wrong.

Alice recognizes the benefits health information technology can bring to health care for her entire family. From allowing medical professionals, across the hospital or across the country to simultaneously review and consult on medical records to a patient's simple desire to spend more time with health care providers rather than filling out the same paperwork over and over again, health information technology brings real benefits to real people.

Additionally, if hospitals and physicians kept records that could be compiled and sorted, data would show you and your doctor options for the most effective course of treatment. Through the use of health information technology, thousands of best practices in medicine could be established through the use of current, real-world data.

As medicine continues to grow more sophisticated, so do the risks and costs of a health care system without information technology. Patterns that indicate serious disease, like repeated ER or doctor's visits for severe indigestion, can be overlooked. Without having a case history of your health at the ready, expensive test results can be repeated - often requiring a costly overnight stay in the hospital. And opportunities for bad interactions among drugs, dietary supplements and even food increase every time a new drug hits the market. The U.S. Congress was so concerned about medication errors it asked the National Institutes of Medicine to investigate. The results are staggering, with errors in medication conservatively estimated to harm 1.5 million Americans each year; the cost of the mistakes, an equally staggering \$3.5 billion a year.

Today's health care is too expensive -- but today's technology can curb costs and improve services. A RAND Study from 2005 says widespread adoption of health IT could result in up to \$162 billion in savings annually for the health care system. Every American deserves the thoughtful treatment that health information technology can provide. A comprehensive and unified health information technology system can give our nation's medical professionals access to the patient histories and medical advances they need to heal injuries and illness, prevent diseases and maintain health -- and save money and simplify steps for patients in the process.

Corporations have used information technology systems successfully for years. Your health is more valuable than any commodity. It's time for the health care industry to learn how to make information technology work for and protect you.

Source: **AARP**

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