

HIM and Consumer Empowerment

Healthcare delivery has undergone many transformations in the last 50 years. We have seen an evolution from fee-for-service to prospective payment and managed care. Another transformation is imminent: the more informed, financially able, decisive consumer making their own choices and decisions about healthcare. This transformation is called consumer-empowered healthcare and it targets rising healthcare expenditures, improved patient safety, and better health information availability.

What is our role in this transformation? Clearly, as individuals use health information in their decision making, we provide the assistance and even tools to help consumers compile and maintain their own information. Recent developments in this area are exciting.

The Surgeon General has recently published a Web site called “My Family Health Portrait.” This Web site contains a tool for consumers to download and document their family history that is easy to use, only stored on the consumer’s computer, and not available to anyone else. The tool can be accessed at <https://familyhistory.hhs.gov/>.

Individuals are also becoming more interested in maintaining their own health records by using various personal health record (PHR) tools. There are as many different types of PHRs as there are ways to imagine using them. Employers are building them as are insurance plans, care providers, and independent vendors who are offering products ranging from paper forms to Web-based systems.

How can healthcare professionals assist a patient in choosing a PHR? Check out the Web site www.myphr.com and educate yourself. Be ready to help a patient who wants to start their own PHR by knowing what types of information they should collect. Additionally, use your privacy and security knowledge to evaluate different electronic products and determine if they meet basic privacy and security requirements.

For example, an electronic PHR offered by a healthcare provider or an insurance company will likely need to meet the HIPAA Privacy and Security regulations. How is the data accessed by healthcare providers providing care? Can the PHR track access? Does it provide for the requirement of a written authorization? Are there adequate online security controls? Is the data used for healthcare operations? The healthcare professional can help a patient sort through those questions.

Another example is the employer-sponsored PHR. It may or may not need to comply with the HIPAA regulations, but it should have good privacy and security controls if it is electronic. Consumers should ask their employer if the information is used for any reason outside the care of the patient, and if so, how.

A third example is a stand-alone product from a vendor. A vendor who is not a covered entity as defined by the HIPAA regulations is not required to comply with the regulations. Most independent vendors with stand-alone products fall in this category. It is likely that the product will require a fee, and might range from downloadable paper forms to a Web-based, interactive product. Evaluate the product by its ease of use and, usefulness to the patient and his care provider, and ask the same questions about privacy and security you would ask a HIPAA covered entity. For electronic PHRs, look for policies on encryption, firewalls and virus protection. Ask about audit controls and disaster recovery plans, and if the data is used by the vendor in any way outside of the use by the patient.

The HIM professional has the unique skills to examine and evaluate the various PHR products and help patients choose the one that is best for them and their ongoing healthcare needs.

Quiz

1. Improved patient safety is a positive outcome of consumer empowerment.
a. True b. False
2. Any PHRs must comply with the HIPAA Regulations.
a. True b. False
3. The best format for a PHR is paper-based.
a. True b. False
4. Patients will have to pay to use a PHR.
a. True b. False
5. Any electronic PHR should have adequate privacy and security controls.
a. True b. False