

## **Interoperability and the Community Hospital**

### **Introduction**

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), signed into law in February of 2009, created a series of major financial incentives designed to accelerate the healthcare industry's adoption of electronic health information technology. ARRA, through its Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (or HITECH) Act, dedicates significant capital (approximately \$20 billion) to incentivize healthcare providers to achieve the "meaningful use" of electronic health record (EHR) systems. This law provides funding to establish Medicare/Medicaid incentives for meaningful use of an EHR by physicians and hospitals.

In the final days of 2009, the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information (ONC) and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid released the government's draft of the criteria which must be met to demonstrate meaningful use. The comment period on the meaningful-use requirements runs for 60 days beginning Jan. 13, 2010, after which the requirements will be officially finalized. (To view the requirements and post a comments, visit [www.regulations.gov](http://www.regulations.gov) and enter keyword HITECH Act.)

### **The Challenge**

The meaningful use requirements are robust and the timetable established to meet the first set of criteria for reimbursement (by 2011) represents a major challenge for many providers. The requirements include EHR certification, implementation, and integration with existing, third-party applications to satisfy these and forthcoming government-mandated health objectives and information-technology (IT) standards. Many existing EHRs are not equipped to meet meaningful-use requirements and healthcare IT vendors are working rapidly to upgrade product offerings.

In addition, EHR systems must help healthcare providers solve business problems with integrated technology solutions. These solutions advance the patient care process, reduce medical errors, increase productivity, improve business operations and drive profitability. Clinical solutions must work together to empower Nurses, Physicians, Pharmacists and other clinicians in their mounting daily tasks.

Interoperability is a key component of the government's goals for improving exchange of information in healthcare. In order to meet the final meaningful-use requirements, hospitals must demonstrate the capability to flow information seamlessly between applications and settings inside the hospital, and ultimately, across multiple healthcare enterprises in the community and reporting agencies.

Specific functionality required for Stage 1 (2011) includes the following:

- HL7 Lab Results Interoperability
- CCD/C32 Interoperability
- XDS MS-Summaries (Discharge Summary)
- Insurance Eligibility Interoperability
- Electronic Claims Submission
- Immunization Registries Interoperability
- Electronic Syndromic Surveillance Interoperability
- Reportable Lab Submission Interoperability

### **Industry activity**

The health IT industry is working through a number of joint initiatives (including the HIMSS Interoperability Showcase) to facilitate the testing and further development of interoperability tools. *Integrating the Health Enterprise* ([www.ihe.net](http://www.ihe.net)) is a global initiative that brings together health information technology stakeholders to implement standards for communicating patient information efficiently throughout and among healthcare enterprises by developing a framework of interoperability. Systems developed in accordance with IHE communicate better, are easier to implement, and enable care providers to use information more effectively.

At IHE's January 2010 North American Connectathon, companies participated in a variety of tests to determine how well their systems conform to IHE integration profiles and share patient information with complementary systems.

Along with numerous industry companies, HMS demonstrated interoperability with all healthcare IT vendors with which it exchanged information during tests in which it was involved.

### **Challenges for Community Hospitals**

The aggressive timetable for achieving meaningful use is a particular challenge for community and rural hospitals, many of whom were facing financial difficulty long before this legislation was enacted. The telecommunications infrastructure necessary to upgrade technology is inadequate in some areas, and many community hospitals are strapped for the capital that will be required for upgrading systems and software to meet these criteria. Many such facilities, short on internal IT staff, will rely on vendor partners to usher them through the necessary steps to acquire and implement tools for meaningful use. It is incumbent on community HIS vendors to rapidly develop and sell cost-effective solutions for the community hospital market. That market has fewer resources than large institutions, but faces the same requirements for achieving meaningful use and the resulting Medicare incentives.

HMS will deliver interoperability that will meet the requirements within its Release 9.0, scheduled for general availability in the summer of 2010. The company, which serves 650 community and rural hospitals nationwide, will apply for 2011 certification for this

product release. For more information about HMS release 9.0, please call 1.800.383.3317.