Electronic health records

Empowering employees to manage their health care

Interviewed by Geoff Caplan

In July, 2007, UPMC Health Plan introduced “MyHealth Record,” a new online personal health record that provides members with access to a convenient and secure tool for improved health management. Smart Business spoke with Michael Taylor, executive director, Marketing and Communications, about personal electronic health records and the important employer issues and concerns regarding its administration and use.

Why is it important to encourage the use of an electronic personal health record?

What many insurers and leaders of health care systems are discovering is that the best way to care for members and patients is to help them to care for themselves. An electronic personal health record empowers users by offering a ‘hands on’ approach to managing health information in a secure and easily accessible manner. Effective use of the tool closes gaps in care and promotes better health. If used in concert with providers, an electronic personal health record can reduce or eliminate duplicate procedures or processes.

What are the essential parts of an effective electronic personal health record?

To be effective and for it to gain acceptance with the public, an electronic personal health record must be both secure and easily accessible. Member health confidentiality must be a priority. The same level of security that is standard in the banking and finance industries should be in place for electronic personal health records.

How can members become engaged in the concept of electronic personal health records?

Members are given a comprehensive and educational way to manage chronic conditions, such as diabetes or asthma, and even track progress to maintain a healthy lifestyle through weight management or tobacco cessation tips. This tool also gives members a chance to take an active role in their health care, while also improving communication with their primary care physician and specialists. It also enables them to track such things as appointments, vaccinations and progress toward their individual health-related goals, while keeping information organized and current. A personal health record is easily accessible from any online connection at all times.

How does an electronic personal health record differ from a record a member might keep on his or her own?

An electronic personal health record not only stores personal health information, it can also provide the chance for members to add detailed personal information, such as family health history, that can help a doctor make a more informed diagnosis. In addition, complete histories can help eliminate repeat medical tests and guard against adverse drug interactions.

A personal health record also provides a chance to view past claims data and review lab screening results or diagnostic tests.

Why should employers be enthusiastic about increased use of electronic personal health records?

A mechanism that helps consumers to get more involved and knowledgeable about their own health can not only bring down overall health costs, but improve the delivery of health care, which would benefit employers, providers, health systems and insurers alike. Whether you are managing a chronic condition or trying to maintain good health, an electronic personal health record can help. It can remind you about important appointments and screenings. It can print information that you can share with your physician. These are features that will encourage use.

What can we expect to happen as a result of more widespread use of the electronic personal health record?

An electronic personal health record is not a panacea for modern medicine; it is just one tool. However, it is a tool that generates a lot of positive publicity because it has the potential to improve the quality of care as well as the personal experience of patients. At present, members have limited access to their own health records. With this system they can more control. By empowering consumers in this manner, there will be substantial changes, and, most of them will be for the better.

What will be the ultimate cost benefit to the consumer?

The cost benefit to the consumer is intangible. If, as expected, widespread use of personal health records decreases medical errors and reduces duplication in tests and procedures, it will reduce the cost of health care, which will directly benefit all consumers. In the United States, the cost of medical errors is estimated at about 20 percent of the health budget. That, of course, does not measure the human cost of such errors. The gains we see in efficiency through increased use of this tool should more than offset other costs related to it.

Recent provider participation feedback around the United States indicates that the standards for sharing information and the interoperability of systems are essential elements of success. What’s your view on this?

Yes, it appears that interoperability of systems will be essential for widespread use of the personal health record. I believe that many of the problems will be overcome as personal health records become more commonplace and the need for interoperability will become more obvious.

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