

Nebraskans weigh in on electronic medical records

By **Tarik Abdel-Monem, Mitch Herian and Nancy Shank**
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Electronic medical records (EMRs) continue to be in the national spotlight. In 2004, President Bush first called for all Americans to have a personal EMR as part of a nationwide domestic agenda.

President Obama restated the push for electronic medical information in a speech in January of 2009: "To improve the quality of our health care while lowering its cost," he said, "we will make the immediate investments necessary to ensure that, within five years, all of America's medical records are computerized."

Sharing health information electronically is believed to have a number of wide-ranging benefits, the most obvious being that a quick access to electronic health information via computer will lead to better healthcare and better health outcomes.

Many physicians and policymakers support greater use of EMRs. However, wide-scale adoption of EMRs has not yet occurred for a number of reasons, including the current policy and regulatory environment, costs associated with moving to computerized records systems, and lack of uniform standards for sharing information electronically. Public acceptance and support for the use of EMRs is another fundamental issue that will need to be addressed.

In November of 2008, the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center (PPC) convened a public input project funded by a Community Technology Fund eHealth

grant provided by the Nebraska Information Technology Commission. The overall purpose of the project was to determine what Nebraska residents currently think and know about EMRs, what their privacy and security concerns are, and what role they think the state should take in regard to electronic health information exchange.

Working with members of the state's eHealth Committee and Health Information, Security and Privacy Committee, the PPC gathered information from state residents by first administering a survey to 168 people in a random sample of residents about EMRs and related issues and then convening a discussion about EMRs among 34 of those survey respondents.

The study found that Nebraskans are generally comfortable with the use of EMRs and understand their benefits. Eighty-one percent of survey respondents believed the use of EMRs can reduce medical errors, and 71 percent believed they can reduce healthcare costs.

When asked if they would prefer to see similarly qualified physicians who either used an electronic records system or did not use one, 43 percent of respondents indicated that they would rather see the physician using an electronic record system and only 5 percent would prefer to see the doctor without one. However, 52 percent of respondents were unsure, indicating that many Nebraskans may not know enough about the pros and cons of electronic versus paper medical records systems.

Secondly, although Nebraskans are generally comfortable with the security of electronic medical records, some concerns

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Hebron's CAH-HIT model

Please go to the website www.thayercountyhealthservices.com to review the progress that the Thayer County Health System has taken to address HIT in their community and area. Stories, information and activities are listed to help each of us to think about the advent of the digital world in our health care system.

still do exist. Sixty-three percent of survey respondents believed that electronic records were more secure than paper ones, whereas 9 percent believed paper records were more secure.

When asked about their greatest security concern, 68 percent of respondents believed that computer hacking or system outages were the greatest potential problem with EMRs. Twenty-four percent were concerned that an employer, insurance company, or provider would use their personal health information inappropriately.

Thirdly, Nebraskans would like greater education about EMRs. Seventy-two percent of survey respondents said it was very important for state government to take a role in providing more information about EMRs to consumers.

Results from the deliberative discussion provided support for the notion that more education about EMRs might increase public support for their use. For example, when first surveyed about EMRs, 45 percent and 58 percent of respondents, respectively, believed that the use of EMRs increases patient privacy and lowers health care costs. Following the deliberative discussion—in which participants had an opportunity to learn more about EMRs during a question and answer session with a

panel of experts—those figures increased to 81 percent and 97 percent respectively.

Finally, many Nebraskans are already using technology in gathering information about health and health care. Eighty-five percent of survey respondents reported that they use the Internet to search for information about health issues, and 45 percent have used a health insurance company's Web site. Only 23 percent of respondents, however, reported having used e-mail to communicate with their healthcare providers, though 70 percent believed that patients should be able to e-mail their doctors as part of their healthcare.

The project demonstrated that Nebraskans are generally comfortable with the use of EMRs but that further information and education would be helpful to consumers as the call for their use continues. Additional public input activities with larger sample sizes should be convened to further gauge Nebraskans' knowledge and attitudes toward EMRs.

A full copy of the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center's report about the project with all survey data is available at <http://ppc.nebraska.edu>. For further questions, please contact Tarik Abdel-Monem, research specialist, at (402) 472-3147 or tabdelmonem@nebraska.edu. □