

HHS Lays Out Plans to Test, Certify EHRs

BY MARY ELLEN SCHNEIDER

The federal government has put forward its plan to test and certify electronic health records in preparation for the Medicare and Medicaid incentive program that will reward physicians for the use of health information technology.

The proposed rule, which was released on March 2, establishes a temporary certification program in which the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology, Dr. David Blumenthal, will designate certain organizations to test and certify complete electronic health records (EHRs) and related modules.

Under the temporary program, Dr. Blumenthal's office would take on many of the functions, such as accreditation, that will later be performed by private groups. The idea behind the temporary program is to ensure that certified EHR products are available before the first incentives for use of certified systems begin in 2011.

The rule also proposes the creation of a permanent certification program that would eventually replace the temporary one. The permanent program would be

more sophisticated, dividing the responsibility for testing and certification among different organizations. The permanent program also would include accreditation processes and set forth the requirement that certification bodies perform surveillance of certified EHR products. Certification bodies also may be able to assess additional health information technology products beyond EHRs and their modules. Both certifica-

tion programs, however, would be voluntary.

Dr. Blumenthal called publication of the proposed rule an "important first step" to bringing structure to the evaluation of EHRs and EHR modules. "The programs will help support end users of certified products, and ultimately serve the interests of each patient by ensuring that their information is securely managed and available where and when it is

needed," he said in a statement.

Earlier this year, the federal government issued a proposed rule outlining the criteria for meaningful use of EHRs and an interim final rule that included an initial set of standards and specifications for certification of products.

Two separate regulations finalizing the temporary and permanent certification programs are expected to be published by the fall. ■

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to take. "This is a good example of where we are not today."

In the meantime, the Department Health and Human Services is trying to get physicians to meet some meaningful use criteria that aren't even written yet, said Dr. Steven Stack, an emergency physician and member of two workgroups of the department's HIT Policy Committee. He noted that two criteria "were supposed to be finished on Dec. 31, 2008, by statute. It's 2010 and they're not done, and it may be a year before we get something. A lot of these things aren't ready for prime time."

Instead of requiring physicians to meet lots of criteria, "if we focus on the smallest of things, then doggedly persist until we knock down those barriers, and then require people to meet those [expectations]—with the proper incentives, we can make a really great step forward," said Dr. Stack, who is a member of the American Medical Association board of trustees.

In contrast, Steven Findlay, senior health policy analyst at Consumers Union, expressed impatience with the process. "We ought to try to push as far as we possibly can with the 2011 meaningful use criteria," he said. "We ought to be exquisitely sensitive to what's doable in 2011 ... but shouldn't be running from time to time to push. We've been talking about this stuff for 10 years, and for the good of patients and consumers, we need to do this."

The conference was sponsored by Ingenix, the AMA, and several other industry groups. The speakers reported that they had no conflicts of interest relevant to their presentations. ■