

EHR Financial Incentives Tied to 'Meaningful Use'

BY JOYCE FRIEDEN

WASHINGTON — Just what exactly does "meaningful use" mean?

It sounds like a simple question, but there's a lot of money riding on the answer. The Recovery Act, formally known as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, stipulates that for a physician to receive up to \$44,000 in financial incentives for buying an electronic health record, the record must be put to "meaningful use." Now the government has to come up with a definition of the term.

At a subcommittee meeting of the National Committee on Vital and Health Statistics, which was convened to discuss meaningful use, several speakers explained why having more physicians adopt an electronic health record (EHR) was so valuable.

"The financial meltdown . . . has shown us how we as a nation need to totally transform the U.S. health care system," said Helen Darling, president of the National Business Group on Health. "We have a fiscal crisis, not just a health crisis; we have to act urgently."

Dr. Elliott Fisher, professor of medicine at Dartmouth University, Hanover, N.H., started explaining the benefits of EHRs by noting that more health care is not always better care. "Gray area" discretionary decisions about when to refer to a specialist explain most of the regional differences

in health care spending and are responsible for most of the health care overuse, he said. The only way to reduce that overuse is to feed the information back to the physician "and start to have a conversation" about when certain tests or referrals are necessary, Dr. Fisher said.

Several panelists agreed that EHRs had to allow for three things in order to be used meaningfully: electronic prescribing, interoperability with other computers, and reporting on health care quality measures. EHRs are particularly useful for reporting quality measures because they are a direct source of information and provide very timely data, said Dr. Michael Rapp of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

The day after the subcommittee's meeting concluded, the Markle Foundation held a press conference to release a document on the definition.

The consensus document provides a "simple" definition of patient-centered meaningful use: "The provider makes use of, and the patient has access to, clinically relevant electronic information about the patient to improve patient outcomes and health status, improve the delivery of care, and control the growth of costs." ■

The consensus document is available at http://www.markle.org/downloadable_assets/20090430_meaningful_use.pdf.

FYI

Booklet Explains Alzheimer's

The National Institute on Aging has released a new booklet that describes the main areas of Alzheimer's disease research and new approaches for helping families and friends care for people with AD. "Alzheimer's Disease: Unraveling the Mystery" is available for free by visiting www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers/publications/unraveling.

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Communicating With Older Patients

The National Institute on Aging has released a new booklet about communicating with older patients. "Talking with Your Older Patient: A Clinician's Handbook" offers practical techniques for diagnosis and promoting treatment adherence. To download the booklet, visit www.nia.nih.gov/health-information/publications/clinicianhb.

Poison Prevention Resources

The Health Resources and Services Administration offers online resources aimed at raising awareness of how to prevent accidental poisonings. Resources include information about poison control centers, a map of U.S. poison centers, and a new brochure on safe medicine use. For more information, contact HRSA by visiting www.poisonhelp.ahsa.gov.

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