Group to Introduce Certification of EHR Products

BY MARY ELLEN SCHNEIDER
Senior Writer

BOSTON — A coalition of private sector informatics groups plans to launch a process for certifying electronic health record products late this year.

Certification will bring some predictability into the market for physicians, vendors, and payers, Mark Leavitt, M.D., who is chair of the Certification Commission for Healthcare Information Technology, said at a congress sponsored by the American Medical Informatics Association.

The commission's initial scope is to certify electronic health record (EHR) products for physician offices and other ambulatory settings. They plan to begin beta testing products as part of a pilot project in September.

The commission, which was founded last year, will be setting a baseline standard, leaving space for competition and innovation above the standard.

By the end of the year, the commission is slated to publish certification requirements and to outline a roadmap for vendors for requirements for the next 1-2 years, Dr. Leavitt said.

The roadmap is a key part of the commission's work because the cycle for getting new features, interfaces, and interoperability functions into a product can be 6-18 months or more. "We need to signal to the industry as to where we are going next, so it has time to respond," he said.

The certification commission was founded last year by the American Health Information Management Association, the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society (HIMSS), and the National Alliance for Health Information Technology.

The three groups have provided seed funding and have loaned staff members to the effort. As the process moves forward, the commission will charge fees to the vendors to cover the cost of testing the products. They also plan to seek sustaining grants from other organizations to maintain their operations, said Dr. Leavitt, who is also the medical director at HIMSS.

Under the voluntary certification process, products will either be certified or not certified. "We are not trying to create a competitive rating system," Dr. Leavitt said.

The idea is that the commission will be setting a baseline standard, leaving space for competition and innovation above that standard. And the standard needs to be based on reality, he said, to get participation from vendors.

In the first year of certification, the members of the commission want to be sure that they don't create any requirements that will shut down the marketplace.

Dr. Leavitt, however, said he expects that, as the standards become more rigorous in the years to come, the marketplace will evolve to follow the certification process.

Currently, adoption is progressing slowly because the market lacks order and predictability.

For example, physicians won't buy electronic records systems until costs are lower, their own risk is lower, and the incentives are higher. However, it's hard for vendors to bring down prices when the sales volumes are so low and the sales cycle is so costly.

Payers have expressed interest in offering incentives for the use of EHRs, but many are concerned that if they start to offer incentives, an industry of minimal systems will spring up to capture that money, Dr. Leavitt said.

Certification is a way to take some of the risk out of the process for all the players, Dr. Leavitt said.

Another challenge is to make sure that there isn't a wave of adoption of products that aren't interoperable.

"We want to ensure that these products that get adopted will be interoperable in this emerging infrastructure," Dr. Leavitt stated at the meeting. "The challenge is the infrastructure isn't there yet, it's emerging. ■

For more information on the certification timeline, visit www.cchit.org.