



Ensuring Consumer Trust and Confidentiality: Even at the Point of Emergency Care

Of all the points along the healthcare continuum where historic patient-specific data is both most needed and scarce, it's in the emergency care setting. Typically, patients enter emergency departments (EDs) either unable or unprepared to provide attending healthcare professionals relevant information that can be vital in both diagnosis and treatment decisions. To date, the attempt to "connect the dots" has come through either hospital system-owned electronic medical records (EMRs) or consumer-owned personal health records (PHRs).

Hospital-based EMRs are limited in utility to those patients who have previously been in a specific hospital and their information is stored, current and available in that hospital's ED. They provide no real benefit for a new patient and are of little use for a patient whose information is out-of-date. And, a hospital-based EMR has minimal, if any, applicability outside of that system's "four walls."

The other attempt to bring patient information to the ED has been through PHRs. The challenge here is that the PHR market, for the most part, has failed to attract consumers. The reason are numerous, but to a great degree consumer fear surrounding privacy and confidentiality issues remains an issue; as does recognized value. Most people are healthy. Therefore, there is little perceived consumer benefit in completing and keeping current a comprehensive PHR.

The analogy by the PHR advocates that people will overcome their trepidations and flock to personal health records much like they are overcoming concerns of other online services, such as banking, financial management, purchasing, etc. uses faulty logic and inadequate parallels. The difference is, young or old, sick or well, we all need access to our money and we all buy things. With PHRs, there isn't the same real need or psychological imperative. Statistically speaking more than 80 percent of us are healthy, rarely use healthcare services and don't even think about our health until something goes wrong. With that as a backdrop, there isn't a strong enough call-to-action in a standard PHR for the average consumer to overcome the obstacles of concern and lethargy.

We believe the answers to gaining consumer trust and engagement in utilizing online health management tools/services may be to:

1. Provide a Service in Which All Can Benefit

We believe the area of emergency care is the common ground in which most people, particularly high utilizers of healthcare services can feel value and benefit. Annually, approximately 20 percent of the U.S. population makes one or more trips to the ED – representing nearly 120 million emergency department visits.

Providing an online service where historic patient data can be securely accessed by emergency care professionals creates a win for all involved stakeholders:

- Consumers/Patients: their critical data is made available at the point of emergency care and will help save lives.

- EDs and Emergency Healthcare Professionals: for the most part, historic patient data is either not available or incomplete at the point of emergency care. Providing this information through a simple, yet secure, online environment that doesn't interfere with traditional workflow patterns is a huge win that can improve outcomes.
- Healthcare Payors win as the streamlining and immediacy of patient information into the ED can mean lower costs and better patient care.

2. Create an Environment of Trust

Overcoming the trust hurdle means operating differently. Consumers must be:

- Empowered to have control over their data. And, that data should be released and shared as they see fit.
- Confident that their information isn't going to be leveraged through log files, cookies, online "footprints," etc. as a means to generate corporate revenue by selling, sharing or renting their specific data to third parties.
- Assured that only authorized and authenticated healthcare professionals will receive their personal health information. These assurances should go beyond basic HIPAA standards to build the consumer trust that has thus far been lacking.

3. Develop a Standard of True Transparency

Whether it is from the patient's, physician's, health plan's or plan sponsor's perspective, all need to understand the role and relationship of how and when patient data is to be accessed, used and managed.

In addition, consumers need to be assured that when their records are accessed they receive immediate notification of when, where and to whom their information was sent. This creates an environment of transparency for consumers whereby they are knowledgeable of the requests for their records and can quickly intervene in the unlikely event an unauthorized entity gained access to their health information. Also, it will serve to prevent PHR vendors from parsing out patient-specific data to third parties as a means to generate revenue; which, we feel is both a violation of consumer trust and a fear many have -- key stumbling blocks to adoption.

It is our belief that driving to the above three principles will begin furthering the foundation upon which engaging consumers in the electronic sharing of their personal health data can gain momentum and market traction.