

Guest Editorial



Harmonizing Standards

Through HITSP's, work specifications simplify connections among systems.

By Joan Duke, MA, FHIMSS

The Health Information Technology Standards Panel (HITSP) is a volunteer-driven, consensus-based organization funded through a contract from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The panel brings together public and private-sector experts from across the health care community to harmonize and recommend the technical standards that are necessary to ensure the interoperability of electronic health records (EHRs). All organizations are encouraged to participate.

HITSP addresses several interrelated issues: the profusion of health information technology standards and lack of agreement on which standards to use, as well as how the data should be defined or formatted, and which protocols to use for communications. For example, do the descriptions of elevated blood pressure, hypertension and high blood pressure identify the same problem? What is the risk factor based on the patient's condition? What are the test results to determine the best method to treat this problem?

HITSP brings value to the industry in terms of standards harmonization — the development of a consensus and specifications for a well-defined approach that can support the business process or use case for health care. HITSP's goal is to allow sharing of information among health care organizations and systems. HITSP seeks to gain agreement on the standards that work best to efficiently transmit useful data.

Why it's important

Patient data should be available to the caregiver when and where needed in a form that saves times and permits analysis. This enables the caregiver to interpret and use relevant data from patient visits, hospitalizations, testing centers and other sites to reduce medical errors, reduce unnecessary testing and support effective decision-making for the patient and providers during an episode of care. It also means that portions of the data are available for secondary uses (e.g, payers use it for billing; public health officials use it for detection of disease and emergency situations; and clinical researchers use it for analysis of effective medical practices).

How HITSP does it

The American Health Information Community (AHIC), which provides recommendations to HHS for interoperable health records, identifies use cases that represent real-world health care situations. Two examples are (1) obtaining electronic lab results consistent with other lab results stored in the patient's EHR or (2) defining the data that a consumer can share with his/her caregivers (electronic communication with personal health records). HITSP reviews these use cases, solicits industry input and sets priorities based on availability of standards, importance to the community and suitability for a given purpose. HITSP develops the interoperability specifications that can be used by system developers within the specific context of each health care situation.

The HITSP Interoperability Specification defines the "constructs," suites of documents that describe how to integrate and constrain the selected standards to meet the business/clinical needs of a particular use case. This provides a roadmap of which standards to use and how to use them. The best way to understand this is to go to www.HITSP.org and follow a set of documents that make up a specification. The documents describe the use case; the transactions that make up necessary communications for querying, sending or receiving the documents or messages; the types of documents; the data fields; and the standard terminologies. The specification also addresses the components that can be reused across use cases such as infrastructure, security and privacy.

Two entities promote and test specifications to proliferate their use in the real world of health care IT: the Certification Commission for Healthcare Information Technology (CCHIT) and National Health Information Network (NHIN). CCHIT will include proof of compliance to HITSP specifications. NHIN will test the specification by including this certification in contract awards. In addition, once the HHS Secretary "recognizes" a HITSP specification, it must be implemented by all applicable federal agencies. Numerous specifications have reached the "recognized" state.

The HITSP work products

Currently available specifications include the following: EHR Laboratory Result Reporting, Bio-surveillance, Consumer Empowerment (personal clinical and demographic data via network and portable media), Emergency Responder EHR, Quality Indicators and Medication Management (medication and allergy information).

Specifications in progress are: Consultations and Transfer of Care, Personalized Health Care, Immunization and Response Management, Public Health Case Reporting, Remote Monitoring and Patient-Provider Secure Messaging.

HITSP's work means that specifications are — or soon will be — available to simplify connections among systems. This will empower all types of health information exchange, including e-prescribing, problem lists, medication lists, quality indicators and lab results. HITSP's work is critical to enable the availability of inclusive, usable data for better treatment and management of health care.

Ms. Duke has been involved for over 40 years in all aspects of health care information systems. She is the founder of Health Care Information Consultants, LLC and currently co-chairs the workgroup that organizes HITSP Webinars.