

## Health Information Compliance Alert

### Technology Update: INSURERS TAKE THE LEAD IN HEALTH CARE IT CHARGE

#### Health plans push innovations that improve quality, cost and efficiency, survey finds.

Health insurers are playing a big role in stimulating and supporting health information technology. But some experts worry that fast-growing health IT advances could create serious roadblocks when too much variety in IT products makes across-the-board adoption difficult.

**Survey results:** Those looking for more concrete details can now see how 38 health insurance companies have implemented more than 40 different health IT advances in a new **America's Health Insurance Plans** report.

U.S. health insurance plans have established technological innovations that providers and patients use as well as insurers. "Health insurance plans are using IT not only to process claims more efficiently but also to promote evidence-based care, add value to health care services, and empower consumers through access to information and decision tools," says AHIP president and CEO **Karen Ignagni**. Such achievements have stemmed from technological advances in case management, e-prescribing, consumer-information tools, claims processing and personal health records, the report notes.

#### Too Many Changes Too Fast

But even as the report touts the wide range of initiatives health plans have undertaken, some industry insiders worry that the variety itself could be hampering IT efforts--and argue that the progress the industry has made could move even more rapidly.

The health care industry's past efforts to advance technology "were not successful because there was too much variation in the technology, which made it hard to invest," says **William Fleming, Pharm.D.**, vice president of pharmacy and clinical integration at Humana. Pharmacies have made inroads on their end because they can organize around the **National Council for Prescription Drug Plans**, "but physicians and hospitals don't have the same kind of entity to govern" developments, he laments.

**Benefit:** Still, health plans undeniably have been instrumental in forwarding technology use and anticipate continuing to generate and refine products in 2006, according to the report.

The roster of initiatives health plans have slated for 2006 include expanded wellness and disease-management programs (Group Health), "audit trails" that denote who has modified the record and when (United), and enlarged networks for current pilot programs (Kaiser, **WellPoint, Health Plan of Nevada**...and **Blue Cross Blue Shield of Florida** and **Humana**, which are sharing a multi-payer-based initiative).

#### New Monitors Increase Accuracy

The report reveals that Florida-based **Health First Inc.**, has developed an electronic intensive care unit program in three participating hospitals. With this product, called **VitalWatch**, critical-care physicians, nurses and technical support staff can monitor ICU patients at all hours from a remote location. The program achieved substantial results, including a 50 percent reduction in patients experiencing cardiopulmonary arrests and a 16 percent drop in ICU patients' mortality risks, according to Health First.

**Tufts Health Plan** has worked with medical manufacturer **Alere Medical** to develop a monitor that members with heart failure can wear. The monitor attaches to a digital scale, and when patients stand on the scale, they respond to specific health-status questions, sending their answers to Alere's database. From there, cardiac nurses examine the data for unusual variations, such as significant weight gain, and notify treating physicians for follow-up as needed.

### **E-Prescribing Programs Take Hold**

Many of the IT initiatives now underway represent joint efforts. A good example is the **eRx Collaborative**, which **Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, Neighborhood Health Plan** and Tufts Health Plan have formed. The plans intend to mitigate the difficulty physicians face when prescribing for various health networks' members. Technology that the **Zix Corporation** and **DrFirst** constructed led to a handheld device that prescribers can use to check patient eligibility and drug history, access formulary information and create or renew prescriptions electronically.

And the **Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services** has announced foundational e-prescribing standards for drug plans participating in the Medicare Part D benefit. These standards become mandatory as soon as Part D begins on Jan. 1, 2006.