

Health groups aim to make medical records easier to access

March 1 2016, by Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar

Technology companies, hospital systems and doctors' groups have agreed to take steps to make electronic health records easier for consumers to access and use, the Obama administration announced Monday.

While nearly all hospitals and most doctors' offices have now gone digital, those systems often don't talk to each other, limiting their usefulness to patients. The latest initiative is meant to speed removal of technological bottlenecks, but it's unclear if it will lead to breakthroughs. The administration needs to make things happen fast, since President Barack Obama leaves office in less than a year.

"Now is the time for this data to be free and liquid and available," said Karen DeSalvo, head of the Health and Human Services department office overseeing the transition to computerized medical records. The goal is to improve care where it matters the most, added DeSalvo, who spoke ahead of a formal announcement by Secretary Sylvia M. Burwell at a health technology conference in Las Vegas.

Taxpayers have ponied up about \$27 billion in subsidies to encourage the adoption of [electronic medical records](#) by hospitals and doctors' offices. But the results so far have fallen short of the data-driven transformation that proponents envisioned. With new personal health applications for mobile devices hitting the market, there's a renewed push to clear obstacles rooted in different technologies and clashing competitive priorities among vendors and health care providers.

The agreement announced Monday covers 16 technology companies active in the health care arena, together representing about 90 percent of hospital electronic records used nationwide.

They have pledged to:

— Improve consumer access. Theoretically, patients would be able to easily access their records from one provider and transfer them to another. That second provider would be able to seamlessly import the earlier records into its system. Think of the retiree from the Midwest who winters in Arizona and runs into an unexpected medical problem.

— Stop blocking health information sharing. A report last year from DeSalvo's office found that some [health care](#) organizations were blocking the sharing of information outside their group. At the time, she called the practice "fundamentally incompatible with efforts to transform the nation's health system." Some experts say that's already changing with greater use of something called "direct exchange," a secure messaging pathway between registered medical providers.

— Put standards for secure, efficient digital communications into effect. That would allow different systems to more easily talk with each other.

Joining the technology companies are major hospital systems such as Hospital Corporation of America and Tenet Healthcare, as well as insurers like Kaiser Permanente. The American Medical Association, the American Society of Clinical Oncology and other medical groups are also participating.

Monday's announcement lacked a hard timetable. DeSalvo said the administration plans to check with the companies this fall to see how much progress has been made.

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Citation: Health groups aim to make medical records easier to access (2016, March 1) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-03-health-groups-aim-medical-easier.html>

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