Could Shortage of Health IT Pros Thwart Creation of Electronic Records Systems?

Training programs are being created to ensure there will be enough IT professionals to digitize country's health care systems

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It's a paradox: In the nation's worst economic crisis in decades, as thousands search for work, some occupations are nevertheless starved for qualified applicants.

Two of those shortages—primary health care providers and health information technology (HIT) professionals—are commanding attention because they stand to thwart a pair of President Barack Obama's domestic goals of expanding access to health care and digitizing medical records.

"Right now, too many folks wind up taking the same tests over and over and over again because their providers can't access previous results," said Obama in a July 2009 speech to AARP. "Or they have to relay their entire medical history—every medication they've taken, every surgery they've gotten— every time they see a new provider. Electronic medical records will help to put an end to all that."

Lucrative Incentives

The Obama administration estimates the nation would save up to $77 billion annually if most hospitals and doctors' offices adopted electronic health records.

In an attempt to get them to do that, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) allows for more than $20 billion in incentives to be awarded to doctors and hospitals that upgrade from a paper-based system to an electronic one by 2020.

"ARRA granted the Office of the National Coordinator (ONC)approximately $2 billion, and workforce development will be a primary goal of those funds," said Dr. David Hunt, chief medical officer, Office of Health IT Adoption for the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT.

The funds will be distributed as part of the Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement process. It will go to providers who can show they are making meaningful use of electronic health records.

"The cost of setting up a system is said to be about $20,000, a small figure compared to the cost of health care," said Dr. William Hersh of the Oregon Health and Science University. "The data show a good return on investment—a reduction in unnecessary care—but the money spent doesn't help the people who pay for it, and that's a huge problem."

This is the reason for the incentives. "For hospitals, the ARRA incentive gives $2 million per hospital over the next four years and, for physician practices, $48,400 per doctor over five years," said Bonnie Siegel, vice president and practice leader with Cejka Search, a Chicago-area health care recruiting firm.

"Hospitals and health systems are buying the systems now," said Siegel. "You can see how many jobs are open on their web sites. There's a huge land rush for people to manage and implement the systems they're buying."

Education Available

Experts say there's a need for two kinds of professionals: IT people who understand system hardware and software, and informatics professionals, who are often individuals with medical education who work in the emerging field of medical informatics.

An April 2008 report co-authored by Hersh and Adam Wright of Harvard Medical School said that the nation needed 40,784 IT professionals.

But that was then. "My suspicion is that we need more people than the number we cited then," said Wright, adding that the report was based only on health care delivered in inpatient settings.

"It's the question of the hour," said Hunt, noting that anywhere from 15,000 to 30,000 IT professionals might be needed. "But I wouldn't be surprised if those estimates are low. Bill Yasnoff [former National Health Information Infrastructure director in the Department of Health and Human Services,] said the number could be up to 50,000."

"When you add in clinics, vendors and others, the number of available jobs may be as high as 200,000," Hersh added.

What's being done to fill the pipeline?

ARRA grants financial assistance to higher education institutions to expand or establish medical health informatics education programs.

ARRA gives preference to programs that are already up and running and/or those that can be completed in 6 months or less, according to Hunt. Some of the money will go to community colleges, some to 4-year universities. There are already at least 200 institutions in the country that can give this training, he said.

But the funds have yet to be disbursed. In fact, their total amount is still unclear, according to Julia Krahe, communications director for Rep. David Wu, D-Ore., who sponsored that section of ARRA. And private-sector organizations aren't waiting.

"The **American Medical Informatics Association (AMIA)** is really on top of it," said Hersh. AMIA has developed a training program called 10 x 10, which aims to train at least 10,000 health care professionals in applied health and medical informatics by 2010. The **10 x 10 course,** offered on the AMIA web site, is an online certification program offered in partnership with several **universities.** Hersh says that most of the participants in the graduate-level training course come from other health backgrounds. As of August 2009, about 700 individuals had completed the program.

Meanwhile, the industry group **Computing Technology Industry Association (CompTIA)** is filling the pipeline by developing certifications for an array of jobs within the broad realm of HIT professions. "These will range from certifications for the technicians that will install and maintain the hardware and software necessary for running EMR applications to certifications for health care professionals who need additional skills to add an IT component to the work they are currently doing," said Trista Roehl, CompTIA public policy manager.

Other available programs include an online program in Public Health Informatics at the School of Public Health at the University of Illinois, Chicago. Western Governors University, an online university based in Salt Lake City, offers a bachelor's degree program. In Maryland, Johns Hopkins University is about to open the doors of a new one-year program leading to a master's degree in health informatics. The University of California at Davis, Emory University, the University of Texas Health Science Center, St. Louis University, the Oregon Health and Science University and Northeastern

University are a few of the other institutions offering programs.

"I think we'll start to see graduates in a year," predicted Hunt.

"It's a good time for the field of informatics as electronic health records grow," said Hersh.

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