Consortus Document Defines ‘Meaningful Use’

BY JOYCE FRIEDEN

WASHINGTON — Just what exactly does “meaningful use” mean? It sounds like a simple question, but there’s a lot of money riding on the answer. The Recovery Act, formally known as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, stipulates that for a physician to receive up to $44,000 in financial incentives for purchasing an electronic health record, the record must be put to “meaningful use.” Now the government has come to a definition of the term.

At a subcommittee meeting of the National Committee on Vital and Health Statistics, which was convened to discuss meaningful use, several speakers explained why having more physicians adopt an electronic health record (EHR) was so valuable.

“The financial meltdown...has shown us how we as a nation need to totally transform the U.S. health care system,” said Helen Darling, president of the National Business Group on Health. “We have a fiscal crisis, not just a health crisis; we have to act urgently.” Although everyone agreed that EHRs were valuable, speakers’ definitions of “meaningful use” of them differed. “Meaningful use might vary by site of care as well as by type of care,” said Dr. David D. Ellerman, of the Computer Sciences Corporation, whereas Dr. John D. Halamka of the Health Information Technology Standards Panel, a government-funded group that helps ensure EHR interoperability, said his definition of meaningful use encompassed businesses and workforces that facilitated improved quality and increased efficiency.

Several panels agreed that EHRs had to allow for three things in order to be considered meaningfully used: electronic precribing, interoperability with other computers, and reporting on health care quality measures. EHRs are particularly useful for reporting quality measures because they are a direct source of information.

Dr. RAPP

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