IU Begins CLEAR Look Into Health Care Records

The idea that a doctor could review an X-ray on his cell phone wasn’t too realistic just a few years ago. But today, that prospect doesn’t sound so strange. In fact, many doctors have viewed some form of medical records on a portable device.

With this increased use of technology, it is important to enforce strict legal and ethical measures to protect patient privacy. That’s why Indiana University, with the help of a $4 million Lilly Endowment grant, recently formed the Indiana University Center for Law, Ethics and Applied Research (CLEAR).

Eric M. Meslin, co-director of IU CLEAR and director of the IU Center for Bioethics, notes that the center exists to examine the legal and ethical issues that arise from the collection, use and distribution of patient health information.

“The center is really responding to what we think is an explosion in the field of personal health information and treatment and research,” he observes. “Health information is created and collected today at a fairly rapid rate, more so than ever before.”

IU CLEAR uses existing offices and administrative staff, meaning all funds will go toward research and applying for more grants.

“We’re taking a pretty broad approach to this. For some of these topics, there may not be a law or it may be ambiguous. We’re hoping to identify some key projects … in which we not only add to a research base, but begin to implement some of those ideas into practice, to look at both ethical and legal best practices for how to go forward,” Meslin says.

The center – led by co-directors Meslin, Fred H. Cate, Kay Connelly and Stanley W. Croasley – will partner with nonprofit and industry groups here and around the country to advance the quality and affordability of health care.

Meslin indicates the center’s research could have a positive effect on life sciences in Indiana, as well as the cost of health care.

“If our work can contribute in a small way to allaying public concern (on legal and ethical issues), that can contribute very positively to the health and life sciences business climate,” he explains. “There’s a tremendous amount of costs that goes into protecting health information; if we can address some of those, we might actually be able to reduce costs.”

Center Works to Keep Patients Safe

Going to the hospital can be scary, especially if you’re there for a surgical procedure or as a result of a serious illness or injury. The one thing you don’t want to have happen is an error or mistake that further threatens your health.

The Indiana Patient Safety Center (IPSC) was formed in 2006 to improve patient safety and outcomes across the state. “The aim is focused on helping facilitate the development of safe, reliable systems,” says Betsy Lee, IPSC director.

Formed through the Indiana Hospital Association, the IPSC works in collaboration with...
Progress has been made in reducing health care costs and improving care by creating the Utah Health Exchange.

Utah a Step Ahead With Insurance Exchange

Knowing the Utah health care system needed a major overhaul, leaders there decided to tackle the growing problem of uninsured residents and rising health care costs on their own — instead of waiting for federal intervention.

The Utah Legislature enacted bills in 2008 and 2009 to start a pilot program called the Utah Health Exchange. Essentially, the exchange creates an online marketplace where consumers can compare and shop for health plans.

One of the main tenants of the exchange is employers offering defined contribution plans. The basic idea is that employers give each employee a lump sum of money to purchase one of the offered plans, with the hope that the employee will pick the plan best suited to his or her needs. Insurance providers compete to offer the best and most affordable plans, thus reducing the cost of health care for employees.

Employees are able to choose health care plans that work best for each individual or family, while paying premium contributions with pre-tax dollars. They have the ability to carry forward an insurance plan when changing jobs, provided both employers participate in the defined contribution plan. Employers also enjoy the benefit of predictable costs in a defined contribution plan.

While not the first state to embark on this type of exchange —
Maine tried it in 2003 and Massachusetts began a health exchange called the Connector four years ago – Utah's effort is unique in that it does not require residents to acquire health care coverage, unlike Massachusetts and federal reform legislation. Also, the Utah exchange organizes the market and allows consumers to compare the plans, while the state of Massachusetts acts as an active purchaser.

The Utah Office of Consumer Health Services opened a limited launch of the exchange in the fall of 2009. Initially, premium prices inside the exchange were higher due to the way insurance carriers were interpreting the state’s existing risk-rating rules.

The Legislature clarified the language and structural issues in an amendment signed into law in March 2010 before launching the exchange to small employers: those with two to 50 employees. A large employer group pilot program for companies with more than 50 employees is currently underway.

Now that the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, passed by Congress in March, mandates that all states establish health care exchanges by 2014, Utah is one step ahead. Other states are now deciding whether to start their own exchanges or allow the federal government to create one for them.

Best Places to Work Earns STAR Award

The Indiana Chamber’s Best Places to Work in Indiana program recognizes Hoosier companies for their strong workplace cultures. Best Places itself was honored recently with a STAR award from the Indiana Society of Association Executives for Outstanding Individual Program/Event.

The 2010 program began in late 2009 with the application period, followed by completion of employer questionnaire and employee survey tools. Independent analysis determined the winners. In May 2010, 70 companies were saluted at the high-energy awards dinner. More than 800 people participated in the fifth annual celebration at the Indiana Roof Ballroom.

Applications are closed for the 2011 program. Winning companies will be named in March, with the final order unveiled at the May 5 awards event. More information is available at www.bestplacessworkin.com.

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