

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Responses from William A. Yasnoff, MD, PhD, President, Health Record Banking Alliance

*What is a community health record bank, and how does it differ from Internet-based PHR applications that are currently available to consumers?

A health record bank provides a secure electronic repository for storing and maintaining an individual's comprehensive health and medical records from multiple sources (including the individual). Existing web-based PHR applications typically require that the patient enter most or all of their own information. While this is helpful for some types of data (e.g., symptoms), physicians are understandably reluctant to rely on patients' transcriptions of objective data such as lab results to make medical decisions. A community health record bank provides secure storage for copies of a patient's medical records, including laboratory results, prescriptions filled, physician notes, allergies, and hospital discharge summaries. A health record bank is, in essence, a compilation of existing electronic medical records from all sources. It therefore can provide, for the first time, a complete picture of a patient's medical history and treatment. It is the current absence of such comprehensive information at the point of care that can result in unnecessary duplicate testing and other avoidable medical errors.

By focusing the health record bank on a community, it is more feasible to connect all the existing sources of electronic information in that community, and facilitate its automatic deposit when it is created. Therefore, participating patients can have more complete records. The community approach also helps to build trust, as a health record bank must enjoy the full confidence of its subscribers in its role as custodian of their medical records.

*What's the value from a consumer perspective in participating in a community health record bank?

It gives consumers the ability to have a copy of their electronic medical records all in one place under their control. They can then make all or part of the records available to their care providers while maintaining freedom of choice as to where to seek care. In addition, new electronic records are deposited in the consumer's account automatically when they are created, eliminating the need for the consumer to request and compile their own records. Also, the records are available 24/7 anywhere in the world so consumers do not need to carry all their records with them.

Finally, a health record bank enables consumers to enjoy additional helpful services. For example, it is possible for a health record bank to immediately notify a consumer's loved ones if their account is accessed by an emergency room doctor.

*How does information flow into and out of the bank?

The bank establishes electronic connections to health care providers throughout the community (via secure Internet connections). When care is given, the provider accesses the current information (with the consumer's permission). When the care episode is complete, the newly generated information is sent electronically to the bank for deposit in the consumer's account, which is then up-to-date for the next provider.

*Do health record banks provide any sort of added layer of privacy or security that goes beyond what a consumer would find with a PHR through his or her provider, insurance company, etc.?

Health record banks only allow access to a consumer's records with the explicit permission of the consumer. This is not typically the case for PHRs sponsored by providers, insurance companies, etc., where the sponsor may decide who has access. Those sponsored PHRs also are not complete, since they only have information from the sponsoring entity -- they do not collect the patients' records from other sources.

*What steps are taken to ensure privacy and security of information stored in the bank? Must the bank abide by HIPAA?

Health record banks provide a high level of security via proven techniques such as physically secure servers, firewalls, intrusion detection, and encryption. Privacy in health record banks is much better than HIPAA, which allows access to patient information without consent for treatment, payment, and operations (as determined by the entity holding the information). By contrast, health record banks only release information with the consent of the consumer. While health record banks are not covered by HIPAA (which would be disadvantageous because of the HIPAA provisions allowing information release without consent), they are covered by the Federal Electronic Communications Privacy Act, which requires consumer consent for release of information.