DIRECT: A SIMPLE BUT CRUCIAL TOOL FOR IMPROVEMENT IN CARE COORDINATION AND PHYSICIAN REIMBURSEMENT

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Healthcare provider offices need a user-friendly, secure means of clinical data exchange, whether they have adopted health information technology extensively or not at all. Secure email systems that use the standardized, federally-sponsored Direct protocol meet this need by providing a common platform that can be used by providers throughout the country. Direct systems can be adopted in tandem with any electronic health record (EHR) technology and by offices that do not use an EHR. This interoperability enables those who have yet to adopt EHR software to benefit from the increased efficiency and security of electronic instead of paper data exchange, while allowing current EHR users to leverage, rather than replace, their existing technology investments. Direct has great potential to improve care coordination by making information exchange both safe and easy for providers. It offers the familiarity and simplicity of email, HIPAA-compliant security including data encryption and sender and receiver authentication, and the flexibility to exchange many different kinds of documents in a wide variety of file types and sizes.

Direct and Care Coordination

The Utah Health Information Network (UHIN), leveraging Secure Exchange Solutions (SES) technology, uses Direct messaging to enable care improvement opportunities for Utah providers and patients. The initial use case for UHIN's Direct implementation was the exchange of mammography referrals and results between the on-base clinic at Hill Air Force Base in Layton, Utah and Intermountain Healthcare's McKay-Dee Hospital Center in Ogden, Utah. The Hill clinic does not provide mammography onsite, so patients are referred to local hospitals for the procedure. The workflow allows the Department of Defense doctor at Hill to initiate a consultation request in their EHR system, which is delivered to the McKay-Dee Imaging Department via a secure Direct message. McKay-Dee can then attach a PDF containing the mammography results to a Direct message sent to the Hill clinic. The workflow offers a secure and efficient alternative to faxes and phone calls to obtain results.

Evolving Use Cases

Expediting the referral and results delivery process is only one of Direct's potential uses that can benefit the healthcare community. UHIN operates a healthcare clearinghouse, and through conducting daily business its staff has become familiar with the medical billing process' unique data exchange needs. When viewed from the perspective of business operations, the same features that make Direct useful for provider-to-provider document exchange give it the potential to fill a major gap in the billing process: the need for a simple, efficient, electronic way for providers to send payers supporting documentation for claims, known as claim attachments. Electronic attachment exchange is important for several reasons. It has the potential to decrease the wait time between claim submission and reimbursement by making it quick and easy for providers to send requested documentation to payers, and for payers to process the

attachments and request additional documentation as needed. It improves workflow for both providers and payers by reducing the burden of managing paper documents, freeing staff time and resources for other efforts and opening a clear line of communication between the provider and the payer. Further, providers have even more incentive to adopt technology that improves care coordination and expedites the adoption of new payment models if that technology can also support their offices by facilitating their reimbursements.

Claim Attachment Exchange in the Larger Picture

Direct's potential to improve the billing and reimbursement process has implications at the national level. Accountable care organizations are intended to help reduce healthcare costs by creating a network for providers to effectively coordinate care across different healthcare sites. They also enable payers to link reimbursements to providers' achievement of specified care quality standards. Medicare ACO participants receive shared savings payments only if they provide care in ways that achieve quality standards as well as producing significant cost reductions. The quality requirements can be expected to lead to an increased need for providers to report clinical data to payers as part of the billing process as the model grows. HHS' figures place the number of ACOs at over 250. Direct can support the ability of providers and payers to engage in new payment models that improve care quality and reduce care cost by enabling efficient data exchange.

The ACO model is not the only area where efficient data exchange between providers and payers is crucial. A study of primary care physicians in Washington State published in the September 2013 issue of *Health Affairs* found that the administrative complications when billing Medicaid, including delayed reimbursements and paperwork burdens, limited physicians' willingness to accept more Medicaid patients. The study also reported that a streamlined billing and payment process would help make working with Medicaid more financially viable for physicians. This study highlights the importance of an efficient reimbursement process to encourage physicians to serve more Medicaid patients, as there will be an increased demand for them to do with expanded coverage growing the number of Medicaid

enrollees. Direct can be used to speed up the exchange of information in the reimbursement process, and thus reduce lag time throughout the reimbursement process.

Addressing Specific Requirements

To realize Direct's potential to improve patient care and healthcare professionals' workflow, UHIN and its technology partner, Secure Exchange Solutions, enhanced UHIN's Direct service with the functionality that providers need to streamline claim attachment exchange. This includes a standard message format that collects data required by payers to match attachments to claims (such as claim ID number) and includes metadata, or sender information, that allows payers' systems to automatically process the attachments. This feature supports the exchange of continuity of care documents, office notes, discharge summaries, history and physical reports, lab results, medication histories, and other attachments.

UHIN members are currently using Direct to exchange attachments for emergency care episodes and home health care. The improved processing efficiency serves both the healthcare provider and the payer, with reduced paperwork and expedited responses.

Conclusion

In our world of accountable care organizations, value-based payments, and Meaningful Use, the need for an efficient, secure, reliable way to exchange clinical information from provider to provider and provider to payer is greater than ever and growing. UHIN's goal is to continue to meet the information needs of the healthcare community by expanding electronic attachment exchange.

About UHIN

The Utah Health Information Network (UHIN) is a nonprofit coalition of healthcare providers, payers, state government and other stakeholders that have come together to reduce healthcare costs and improve quality and access for the community by enabling providers, payers and patients to exchange information electronically. UHIN focuses on creating electronic exchange solutions that work for the entire healthcare community, from single-provider practices to large integrated healthcare systems. UHIN offers Direct as part of its Clinical Health Information Exchange (cHIE) service. For more information, visit www.uhin.org.

About Secure Exchange Solutions (SES)

Secure Exchange Solutions (SES) offers simple, secure and scalable solutions for exchanging healthcare information via the Internet. SES is a committed member of the Direct Project and helps healthcare providers meet the requirements for Meaningful Use initiatives. SES products expedite healthcare communications, improving quality of care, optimizing care transitions, speeding up payments and reducing reliance on costly fax, courier and express mail services. For more information, please visit www.secureexsolutions.com.