Volume 4 / Issue 1 / 2009 - Features

Integrating the Health Enterprise:The IHE Mission

The fast-evolving field of e-Health standards is both a puzzle and a challenge to many healthcare IT managers. As the age of electronic health records (EHRs) approaches by the day, it is self-evident that optimal patient care will require care providers to create, access, update and use these records both efficiently and securely.

Not Another Standard

In spite of its rather unwieldy name, Integrating the Healthcare Enterprise (IHE) is an initiative by healthcare professionals and the IT industry to assist in making a gap analysis between new e-Health standards and the challenges faced by users – as well as their requirements.

Though the two are occasionally confused, IHE itself is by no means yet another standard.

End Goal Remains Quality of Clinical Care

The inspiration behind IHE dates back to 1997, when a group of radiologists and healthcare IT experts sought to establish a process through which best-of-breed healthcare standards could be assessed in real-world practice, with requirements for interoperability then implemented. IHE seeks to accelerate the adoption of EHRs by improving information exchange between healthcare systems, providing actionable information to healthcare practitioners and decision makers and thereby enhancing the quality, efficiency and safety of clinical care.

IHE studies and assembles cases, identifies available standards which it reviews, tests and documents, following which it develops technical guidelines (Integration Profiles) for manufacturers to implement. These Profiles leverage the integration capabilities of communication standards such as HL7, DICOM and other standards.

Lower Costs, Complexity and Headaches

For healthcare IT managers seeking to buy or upgrade systems, the Profiles are a reliable means to determine compliance with standards which are sufficient to attain efficient interoperability. This translates into lower costs, complexity and above all, anxiety, as far as procuring and implementing interoperable systems in a fast-evolving landscape of standards is concerned. Both buyers and users report that systems in compliance with IHE Integration Profiles not only communicate better, but are easier to deploy and operate. As a result, they enable healthcare providers to access information more effectively and deliver better patient care.

Methodology

At present, IHE annually brings together users and developers of healthcare IT based on the following steps:

1. Healthcare providers and IT management define critical use cases which require the sharing of information; IHE chooses the areas to focus on.

2. Technical experts create detailed specifications (IHE Profiles) to address these cases, selecting and optimising established standards.

3. Industry implements the Profiles in their products and systems.

4. On the awareness-raising side, IHE organises so-called Connectathons to enable vendors to demonstrate the interoperability of their products. On its part, IHE tests vendors' systems at such events.

IHE Domains

IHE is organised under clinical and operational domains, whose number has been rising over the years. The domains produce their own Technical Framework documents, but do so in close coordination with other IHE domains. These documents are released for public comment and also subject to annual expert reviews. Before they are republished (with supplements which define new profiles), a revised profile is subject to an IHE implementation testing process.

The following IHE profiles have been published (either in trial implementations or final text versions):

Ó Anatomic Pathology

Ó Cardiology

Ó Eye Care

Ó IT Infrastructure

Ó Laboratory

Ó Patient Care Coordination

Ó Patient Care Devices

Ó Quality, Research and Public Health

Ó Radiation Oncology

Ó Radiology

Current Priorities

About 250 products and solutions have been released with support for one or more IHE Profiles, while c urrent priorities include patient-ID binding, to ensure that medical data from one patient is never accidentally placed under the wrong name. Other areas of attention include user-friendly, point of- care technology and ways to enhance device-enterprise communication.

Published on : Sun, 4 Jan 2009