

The Next Big Thing at HIMSS08

Davies Awards Reveal Progress and Promise

Selecting a topic for the first post-HIMSS08 column was a challenge. Innovative products from the exhibit hall competed with dynamic educational sessions to be called the “next big thing”—the revolutionary idea that will reshape the delivery of healthcare.

Several vendors unveiled impressive labor-saving, error-reducing technologies to integrate EHR and diagnostic devices. Prominent speakers—the leaders of Google and Revolution Health among them—presented compelling cases for personal health records and providing patients more control over the content and access to their medical information.

The sheer rise in the number of exhibits and presentations at HIMSS year after year demonstrates healthy competition in the marketplace of products and ideas. Information technology’s capabilities to improve healthcare are expanding at an impressive rate, with corresponding impact on the medical marketplace.

ADVANCES IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

From this futurist’s perspective, the most promising demonstration of progressive change came from the 2007 Nicholas E. Davies Awards.

The Davies Awards program recognizes healthcare IT excellence in multiple healthcare settings (www.himss.org/davies). The Davies Awards offer proof that the theory of healthcare IT can be put into everyday practice and positive results

can be achieved with commercially available technologies.

Individual recipients of the Davies Awards include physicians who have implemented computer-based systems that demonstrably enhanced safety and quality in their practices. The 2007 winners show that electronic records work in all medical practice settings—from a solo practice in San Antonio, to a large multi-specialty group in New York City. They also prove that physicians will embrace EHRs in their offices because digital transformation is worth the effort.

WINNING TESTIMONIALS

My interviews with a group of this year’s recipients revealed an impressive array of the benefits that can be enjoyed by physicians who accomplish a digital transformation of their practices. Their passion is a great antidote for the prevailing cynicism about healthcare IT in physicians’ practices. It shows that “paperless” is not only possible, but desirable.

The 2007 Davies Award winners spoke enthusiastically about services that were impossible or impractical before automation. The ability to conduct elec-

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tronic searches of patient records, for example, allowed them to enroll patients in research studies and gain access to promising new therapies.

They have seen the quality of care rise with the capability to use decision-support tools and get instantly alerts when they are issued, allowing them to quickly remove patients from drugs that have been recalled by the manufacturer or withdrawn by the FDA—a life-saving action that is handled with shameful inefficiency when patient records are on paper.

Fostering patient communities has been another noteworthy improvement of computerization. Up-to-date educational information can now be sent to patients with specific conditions. Patient portals also have become cost-effective vehicles for enabling information exchanges that lead to better outcomes.

The Davies recipients also talked about improvements in their ability to care for non-English speaking immigrants. They can provide patients with links to Web sites that describe disease and treatments in multiple languages. Patient portals also allowed the practices to stay in touch with highly mobile patients because e-mail is a lot more reliable than letters for communicating with many patients who do not have a regular address.

Practice automation has provided the Davies recipients with another unexpected benefit, easier compliance with bureaucratic requirements of the many health plans and government programs that reimburse medical practices serving diverse populations. For example, the practices can use software tools to complete the different credential applications of multiple payors and to get instant infor-

mation about each plan's drug formularies—colossal hassles for practices that are not computerized. Automation also can generate required compliance reports with the push of a button, saving time and personnel resources.

THE BOTTOM LINE: APPRECIATIVE PATIENTS

The Davies Award is not the only recognition that these physicians have received for digitally transforming their practices. Patients have been just as praiseworthy. Patients particularly appreciate the ability to retrieve test results and make appointments online. Many patients have thanked their doctors for making care so much more convenient. Consumer satisfaction tends to get lost in the discussion of practice automation, but its importance is rising fast as financial responsibility is being shifted to consumers.

The significant shifts in payment for care suggest that digital offices may soon have a competitive advantage. Patients who pay a significant portion of their doctors' bills will be looking for the best value, and automated practices will be in the best position to respond to value-based purchasing. Having an EMR is likely to emerge as a major market differentiator for medical practices as patients become increasingly aware that electronic records are the key to competitive prices and top quality. After talking to this year's Davies Award recipients, I can foresee the not-too-distant day when a significant number of informed and empowered patients will only seek

care from medical offices that have fully entered the digital age.

Why would a patient want to spend his or her own money on a doctor who doesn't have instant access to all the information that defines state-of-the-art medical care? Thanks to the Davies Awards program and the progressive practices it recognizes, the obvious answer to this inconvenient question will accelerate the move toward full adoption of information technology in medical practice.

This year's Davies recipients have a great success story to tell—a welcome and prom-

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ising counterweight the conventional wisdom that doctors won't abandon the paper trail. They may not get as much press coverage as the new products and celebrity speakers at HIMSS08, but they are the reasons why I left HIMSS08 with renewed optimism about healthcare IT's unique power to improve healthcare. Please join me in spreading the word. **JHIM**

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