

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### ***What is Health IT and Health Information Exchange (HIE)?***

Traditionally patient medical information has been recorded on paper, then filed in a medical record and stored on site at the healthcare provider's facility. Unfortunately, information stored in this manner is not easily accessible by the patient, the provider, or providers in other healthcare facilities who might need access to the information for coordinating care. Recent advances are helping to reduce this problem by automating medical information. This area of specialization is known as *health information technology (health IT)*. Health IT refers to the computer software, systems, and tools that are becoming more common in today's healthcare industry, making the automation of patient health information possible. *Health information exchange (HIE)* refers to the exchange of patient health information among providers, patients, and other authorized entities in real time. As one of its fundamental features, HIE must provide the safeguards necessary to ensure the security, privacy, and other protections for such information to be transmitted electronically.

### ***What are the benefits of Health IT and Health Information Exchange (HIE)?***

Automating medical information and information exchange in healthcare facilities can provide benefits to both the provider and the patient. Some specific benefits include the following:

- *Improved patient care.* Many health IT tools are available that enable providers to access pertinent medical information about their patients including illnesses, conditions, treatments, etc. Having this information readily available can improve the overall quality and safety of medical care by reducing errors and facilitating coordination of care, thus improving patient outcomes.
- *Improved efficiency, accuracy, and convenience for the provider and patient.* Having the patient's complete medical record in a readily accessible electronic format allows providers to obtain information coming from a variety of sources including other providers, hospitals, pharmacies, nursing homes, insurance, etc. Having the patient's information centralized and accessible greatly reduces time otherwise spent locating and reviewing charts and calling other providers in the patient's healthcare network to obtain information. The centralized data storage also helps to reduce errors associated with information being entered multiple times from multiple providers. Patients also benefit because they are no longer required to fill out the same forms at each provider's office because the information is stored in the health IT database.
- *Reduced costs.* Health IT can reduce costs through the basic overall improvements in efficiency inherent in the system. The reduction in redundant laboratory/diagnostic tests ordered, the reduction in paper within the system, and the reduction in associated administrative costs result in further savings.

### ***What is an Electronic Health Record (EHR)?***

An *electronic health record (EHR)* is the patient's official health record in digital form and is the central component of the health IT system. An EHR contains all information within a patient's medical record, and it allows essential information (medical history, lab and test results, pharmacy records, consults, etc) to be electronically exchanged and easily shared among healthcare stakeholders involved in different areas of care specific to that patient. Stakeholders include the patient, healthcare providers, employers, and/or payers and insurers. As one of its most fundamental benefits, the EHR essentially follows the patient through time, providing continuity of healthcare information to multiple providers.

### ***What is a Personal Health Record (PHR)?***

A *personal health record (PHR)* is similar to an EHR in that it stores patient health information electronically. However, unlike the EHR, information in the PHR is owned and maintained by the individual patient. This information comes from healthcare providers as well as the patients themselves, allowing patients to manage and track information and to more actively participate in their own healthcare. The PHR provides a universally accessible, permanent record of the patient's medical history, including information such as allergies and adverse drug reactions, medications, vaccinations, illnesses, hospitalizations, surgeries and procedures, laboratory and diagnostic results, and family history. Patients can most often access their PHRs through the provider's *patient portal*.

### ***What is a Patient Portal?***

A *patient portal* is an online webpage linked to a healthcare provider's website where patients can access their PHR and other health management tools. The portal can also serve as a primary means of communication between patient and provider and is geared toward helping patients participate more directly in their care. Patient portals may include features such as the following:

- Appointment scheduling tools
- Email access to providers for specific questions or consults
- Medication refill and treatment reminders/alerts by phone, email, text messaging, etc.
- Health status indicators and reminders related to immunizations, health screenings, weight loss, exercise, nutrition, etc.
- Evaluation of data entered from health monitoring devices such as blood pressure, blood glucose levels, etc.
- Access to laboratory/diagnostic test results
- Reference materials such as drug and health encyclopedias

### ***How will my medical information be kept private and secure?***

As health information technology (health IT) evolves and health information exchange (HIE) becomes more commonplace and widespread, it is vital that patient medical information be protected through strict privacy and security measures.

*Legal protections and regulations.* Legal protections and regulations have been put in place which must be followed by all providers and authorized entities. One such regulation is the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act, passed by Congress in 2009, which adds new protections to the regulations set forth in the original 1996 Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). In addition, the HIPAA Privacy Rule ensures that patient health information is properly protected, while at the same time allowing the flow of health information that is necessary to promote high-quality healthcare. Protecting patient health information is a critical part of building trust between patients and healthcare providers, especially as we move forward with using electronic health records (EHRs). Patient privacy and security will be improved with these new regulations by extending enforcement to business associates and other covered entities, strengthening patients' rights to request and receive their medical information in electronic format, and setting new limits on the use and sale of patient information.

*Information security and safeguards.* Providers must ensure that all patient health information and information systems are systematically protected from any unauthorized access, use, disclosure, disruption, modification, perusal, recording, or destruction. A successful information security program has a set of objectives, policies, and procedures that are stated clearly and concisely and are based on system functionality, mission requirements, and available resources. To meet these information security requirements, providers use three types of safeguards within their organizations: administrative, physical, and technical. The following are examples of how each type of safeguard is implemented:

- *Administrative safeguards* – Implementation of policies, protocols, and training
- *Physical safeguards* – Installation of locks, alarms, and security systems
- *Technical safeguards* – Implementation of computer access controls, data encryption, firewalls, and virus checks

Although the best choice and combination of safeguards will vary from organization to organization, the ultimate goal should always be to protect the privacy and security of patient health information to the highest degree possible.