

Blue Button Initiative Offers a Glimpse into the Future of Sharing Health Data

The most exciting thing for me about being in healthcare today is the contrast between steep challenges the industry faces on so many fronts – and the vast potential offered by biological and information technology. We do have some dragons to slay, but we also have amazing tools: genetic research, stem cell therapies and nanotechnology, alongside the potential for insight gleaned from mountains of big data. It's an exciting time, to be certain, and with so much change happening on so many fronts our work is in the spotlight more than it has been in a long time.

We don't have to wait for exotic technologies or highly educated software to make a positive difference in patient care and outcomes. Often the most empowering tools for the patient are the simplest to use. If engagement is the holy grail of patient-centered care, then it has to be our goal to make that engagement simple and effective. In the United States especially, with an aging demographic and a generation behind it accustomed to slick consumer-driven technology, it is not enough for new treatments to be powerful – they also have to be approachable.



One of the most interesting ways this is being done right now is at the Department of Veterans Affairs (or the VA) with the **“Blue Button Initiative”**. The project has given veterans the ability to click a “blue button” and download their own health and military service records into a simple text file or pdf.

“Blue Button gives veterans complete control of this

information – without any special software – and enables veterans to share this data with their health care providers, caregivers, or people they trust.” – from the VA’s Website

This project works in conjunction with the **My HealtheVet Personal Health Record**, which has been online since 2003. My HealtheVet allows veterans to access and store their own health data: from lab reports from VA hospitals to self-entered data like weight and vital signs taken as part of regular care, plus food and activity journals for veterans trying to control weight.

By clicking on the Blue Button, patients can get their entire PHR (Personal Health Record) from My HealtheVet (or only information of a specific type, or from a specific time period) and immediately have control of their data. The beauty of the Blue Button is its simplicity – simple to download, and simple to share, too. The text file created by the Blue Button is machine readable, so it is easily read by a computer program, and simple to view on any computer or mobile device regardless of platform or software.

The Blue Button concept can work the other way as well. Once patients have their data, they can easily share it: with paramedics in emergency situations, with their own doctors at appointments, or between appointments to track progress, and with caregivers in the home. By allowing a way for health information to be shared simply and without worrying about the platform on either end of the transmission, the Blue Button opens the door for some amazing advances down the road. Blue Button data could easily be de-identified and used in clinical research trials or community health projects. Public Blue Button repositories of this data could allow patients to compare their health statistics to those with similar demographics and histories to track their own health goals. And on top of all of this, the patient becomes more experienced, knowledgeable and confident about accessing,

controlling and sharing their own data.

The Blue Button Initiative has now expanded to partner with other large repositories of Personal Health Information to expand the Button's capabilities beyond just the VA. Both government agencies and private insurers as well as data repositories have added Blue Button access to their online portals so that their own patients can easily capture and control their health data. Just last week United Healthcare announced they would add Blue Button functionality to their customers online records for 500,000 of their members in Nevada. The company plans to roll out the technology to 26 million members by the middle of 2013.

When the benefits of simple technologies are powerful for everyone in the system: patients, provider and payers alike; simple ideas can have a profound affect on large scale problems. With the Blue Button Initiative the VA, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and many private partners are achieving just that.