Guest Author Steve Adams from MyFax: Your EHR Strategy – Don't Forget About the Faxing

Healthcare reform is a top priority of the Obama administration and as a result the government will be watching closely to make sure healthcare providers are getting on board with Electronic Health Records (EHR). And while the 2014 deadline may seem like plenty of time to make the conversion, in reality it's a pretty ambitious target date.

It's likely that most of the focus for healthcare organizations over the next four years will be placed in three areas:

- getting a comprehensive EHR application in place within the organization
- making sure it can freely exchange data as part of the national system
- converting the existing paper records into electronic files

But there's one other critical area that could be easily overlooked: faxes. Every day, healthcare providers exchange thousands of pages of patient, insurance and other data by fax. There are several reasons for this preference for faxing over email.

The big one is the requirements of the Health Information Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). According to HIPAA, email is not secure enough to transmit confidential patient information. It can be intercepted and read too easily, thus violating a patient's right to confidentiality. Faxing is the only form of electronic transmission acceptable under law.

Even if they could use email, many physicians would still choose not to. They don’t like to have their email in-boxes filled with a lot of information they’d prefer be handled by their staff, and they fear being inundated with SPAM.

Another reason for the preference for faxes is many healthcare providers still use paper charts, which is the reason President Obama is pushing for the move to EHR. If a paper record needs to be forwarded from one provider to another, or to the same provider working out of multiple locations (two offices, a clinic, a hospital), the easiest way to get it there is to fax it.

One of the drawbacks to a fax machine is that although it transmits the documents electronically, the readable output is still on paper. If you want to store it electronically, either as part of an EHR or in anticipation of one, someone will need to scan it and save it. Turning paper into electronic documents can quickly become a time and resource sink.

There is a solution that both keeps the legal and practical advantages of faxing while eliminating the need for additional scanning ”“ an Internet fax service. With these services, documents are transmitted using fax protocols (thus meeting HIPAA requirements), but are sent and received as attachments in email accounts. The default format is PDF, but better services give you a choice of document formats so you can integrate them into your EHR.

With an Internet fax service, electronic documents can be easily forwarded, attached to electronic medical records and stored. There’s no paper to misplace, no ink to smear, and no chance that a document relating to patient A will end up in patient B’s file because two faxes got mixed together.

On the sending side, an Internet fax service can be tied into the provider’s contact management system, eliminating the need to dial a phone number on a keypad and stand at the machine

while the fax goes through. This method not only saves time, it also prevents a patient's confidential medical information from being accidentally faxed to Petersen Auto Body ""avoiding another potential HIPAA violation.

Unlike many improvements in the medical world, which tend to cost more to implement, an Internet fax service can help seriously reduce costs over using fax machines. Elimination of the paper used to print faxes alone can save thousands of dollars. Add in the elimination of the machines, the dedicated fax lines, toner and electricity and you're potentially saving thousands more.

I asked Steve to expand on the MyFax product.

Q: What EMR systems is your product currently working with?

A: We have integrated with many EMR systems including NextGen and eClinical Works.

Q: What is involved (time, money) in interfacing your product to an EMR?

A: We have very robust APIs that enable us to complete the integration within a few weeks. If the integration is delayed, it's usually due to business issues such as contract negotiations or legal matters.

Q: Can you explain in more detail the process to fax electronic medical records to a party outside the practice?

A: A doctor or nurse working within an EMR can fax directly from it. The document is then securely sent through our infrastructure. All data is encrypted in transit and then delivered to the recipient.

Q: What benchmarks can you give for the time it takes for a medical office employee to receive a fax, identify it as belonging to a specific patient, and index the fax into the EMR? Number of faxes one employee can receive, identify and

index in an hour? A day?

A: Faxes are delivered right to the EMR. MyFax provides an indexing file which the application reads, and then puts the file in a work folder where the user can action it. From this point of view, it is then a question of the efficiency or capability of the employee and/or the actual EMR system.

For even greater efficiency, if the EMR system has OCR or Bar-coding capability, the fax can be directly attached to the patient record.

Q: Is your product priced by subscription or transaction volume, or some other way?

A: MyFax is Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) and is subscription based. We work with customers to create tailored subscriptions based on their business and fax needs.

Steve Adams is the vice president of marketing for Protus, a provider of communications tools for small-to-medium-businesses and enterprise organizations, including the MyFax (www.myfax.com) internet fax service; my1voice, a virtual phone service; and Campaigner, an e-mail marketing service. He can be reached at sadams@protus.com.