March 2014

ELECTRONIC HEALTH RECORDS

HHS Strategy to Address Information Exchange Challenges Lacks Specific Prioritized Actions and Milestones

Why GAO Did This Study

The Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health Act (HITECH) promotes the use of health information technology and identifies the importance of health information exchange. It provides incentive payments to promote the widespread adoption and meaningful use of EHR technology. To be a meaningful user, providers are to demonstrate, among other things, that their certified EHR technology can electronically exchange health information. GAO examined (1) the key challenges to the electronic exchange of health information, if any, that have been reported by providers and stakeholders, and HHS's ongoing efforts to address them, and (2) the extent to which HHS has planned future actions to address those key challenges. GAO reviewed HHS documentation; interviewed HHS officials; and interviewed providers—hospital officials and physicians—and relevant stakeholders about their experiences.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that CMS and ONC (1) develop and prioritize specific actions that HHS will take consistent with the principles in HHS's strategy to advance health information exchange, and (2) develop milestones with time frames for the actions to better gauge progress toward advancing exchange, with appropriate adjustments over time. In commenting on the draft report, HHS, including CMS and ONC, concurred with these recommendations.

View GAO-14-242. For more information, contact Linda T. Kohn at (202) 512-7114 or kohnl@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Providers and stakeholders GAO interviewed in four states with ongoing electronic health information exchange efforts cited key challenges to exchange, in particular, issues related to insufficient standards, concerns about how privacy rules can vary among states, difficulties in matching patients to their records, and costs associated with exchange. Officials from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC)—agencies within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)—noted that they have several ongoing programs and initiatives to help address some aspects of these key challenges, but concerns in these areas continue to exist. For example, several providers GAO interviewed said that they have difficulty exchanging certain types of health information due to insufficient health data standards. Although HHS has begun to address insufficiencies in standards through its Medicare and Medicaid Electronic Health Record (EHR) programs, such as through the introduction of new 2014 standards for certified EHR technology, it is unclear whether its efforts will lead to widespread improvements in electronic health information exchange. In addition, providers GAO interviewed reported challenges covering costs associated with electronic exchange, such as upfront costs associated with purchasing and implementing EHR systems. While HHS is working to address this challenge through various efforts, including a program that helps fund health information exchange organizations—organizations that provide support to facilitate the electronic exchange of health information—some providers told GAO they do not participate in these organizations because they see limited opportunities for exchanging information through them.

HHS, including CMS and ONC, developed and issued a strategy document in August 2013 that describes how it expects to advance electronic health information exchange. The strategy identifies principles intended to guide future actions to address the key challenges that providers and stakeholders have identified. However, the HHS strategy does not specify any such actions, how any actions should be prioritized, what milestones the actions need to achieve, or when these milestones need to be accomplished. GAO's prior work, consistent with the Government Performance and Results Act Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA), sets forth several key elements of strategies that can guide agencies in planning and implementing an effective government program. As noted in GAO's prior work, elements such as specific actions, priorities, and milestones are desirable for evaluating progress, achieving results in specified time frames, and ensuring effective oversight and accountability. Determining specific actions and exchange-related milestones with specified time frames can help to ensure that the agencies' principles and future actions result in timely improvements in addressing the key challenges reported by providers and stakeholders; this is particularly important because planning for Stage 3 of the EHR programs, which focuses on improving outcomes, is expected to begin as soon as 2014. This information could also help CMS and ONC prioritize their future actions based on whether health information is being exchanged effectively among providers, in order to better achieve the EHR programs' ultimate goals of improving quality, efficiency, and patient safety.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**