Health Information Exchange (HIE) – The Other Part of the Interoperable Electronic Health Record (EHR) Mandate

Annie Schwain, MA, LADC, LAMFT

The underlying goals of the 2015 Interoperable EHR mandate are to coordinate client centered care, reduce costs, and improve quality of care for clients using best practices and research to inform treatment. An EHR has a number of components to support this, including clinical decision support to inform care providers in real time of best practices, client portals which allow clients to access specified information in their medical record, such as billing information or summary reports, and a secure means of communication between clients and care providers. An interoperable EHR allows us to take the information we have and share it with the other providers involved in a client’s care in an efficient and secure way.

What does it mean to be interoperable? The mandate specifically requires an interoperable EHR, which means that the EHR is built to coding specifications, specifically HL7, that allow it to send information to or receive information from another EHR, even if it is a different vendor. Most of the popular electronic practice management systems are not built to these specifications and are not interoperable with EHRs, which is why they do not meet the mandate requirements. While a certified EHR has the capability to exchange information, providers will also need to obtain HIE service, likely through another provider, to make the actual exchanges.

Why is this interoperable piece so important? It allows care providers to communicate with each other and exchange information relevant to caring for a client in real time, so that it can be used in a meaningful way. As therapists, we focus on the mental and emotional health and well being of our clients, which does not exist in isolation from their physical health. It may be useful for a client’s primary care provider to know that they are getting support for depression or anxiety, particularly if they are prescribing medications for one of those conditions, or if their depression or anxiety stems from an issue related to their physical health. Alternatively, it may be helpful for us as clinicians to know who else a client is working with to address their mental health concerns, medications they are taking, or significant medical issues that may impact their emotional or mental health. Marriage and family therapists coming from a systemic perspective have a natural inclination to view their clients in the context of the systems that they interact with, which lends itself well to communicating with other care providers working with the client.

So what exactly are we exchanging? In many ways, we’re sharing the same information we always have when coordinating care for our clients. After discussing with the client what information we would like to share, with whom, and why, we obtain the client’s permission with a release of information, and we disclose what is allowed per that release. The need for releases of information and client consent does not change with the introduction of this mandate. Clients need to be given informed consent regarding the risks and benefits of having their records shared through an HIE, and may personally choose to opt out of this exchange process after informed consent. We as clinicians, however, can not make this decision for them.

A Continuity of Care Document (CCD), will likely be one of the documents most frequently exchanged between care providers. It provides a snapshot of the client’s status or state at a particular point of time, rather than extensive or detailed information. A certified EHR should have the capability to generate a CCD with the click of a button or two, allowing you to easily pull together the information needed to
coordinate care with other providers. CCDs are standardized summaries, regardless of the provider you see or what clinic you use, which include basic information, such as your name, date of birth, vital signs, the reason for your visit, recommendations that were made, and the plan for your continued care. While other providers working with your client may not need detailed notes or lengthy summary reports, it may be helpful to know what their diagnosis is, who they are working with to address it, and what the plan is for them to get continued care or support. A CCD provides this basic information without unnecessarily compromising the client’s privacy. Currently there is not a CCD template specifically for mental health, however there are groups working to create such a document that reflects the needs and concerns of mental health providers.

Isn’t health information exchange (HIE) a part of an EHR? Some EHRs have built in secure direct messaging, which is one method of health information exchange. Other EHRs have preferred HIE providers that they encourage their customers to use, while still others provide only an EHR, leaving you to obtain your HIE service through a separate provider. If you are currently using a certified EHR, check with your vendor to see if secure direct messaging is available to you. If it is not available, or if you do not have a certified EHR, the MN Department of Health has a list of state-certified providers that will provide you with secure direct messaging service for a monthly fee, after completing the application process.

Want to learn more about health information exchange? Check out these resources:

- **Voda Counseling**
  - Workshops and resources to learn about EHR and HIE adoption
    - [www.vodacounseling.com](http://www.vodacounseling.com)

- **MN Department of Health**
  - Information on Health Information Exchange (HIE) in Minnesota
    - [http://www.health.state.mn.us/e-health/hie.html](http://www.health.state.mn.us/e-health/hie.html)
  - A Practical Guide to Understanding Health Information Exchange
    - [http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/hpsc/ohit/hieguidance/assesslandscape.html](http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/hpsc/ohit/hieguidance/assesslandscape.html)
  - A list of state-certified HIE providers
    - [http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/hpsc/ohit/certified.html](http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/hpsc/ohit/certified.html)

- **National Learning Consortium / HealthIT.gov**
  - What Should Health Care Professionals and Support Staff Know About Health Information Exchange?
  - Health Information Exchange: Making Sure Health Information is Available When and Where It’s Needed