HEALTH INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

HHS Is Pursuing Efforts to Advance Nationwide Implementation, but Has Not Yet Completed a National Strategy

Why GAO Did This Study

Health information technology (IT) offers promise for improving patient safety and reducing inefficiencies. Given its role in providing health care in the United States, the federal government has been urged to take a leadership role to improve the quality and effectiveness of health care, including the adoption of IT. In April 2004, President Bush called for widespread adoption of interoperable electronic health records within 10 years and issued an executive order that established the position of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The National Coordinator, appointed in May 2004, released a framework for strategic action two months later. In late 2005, HHS also awarded several contracts to address key areas of health IT.

GAO has been reporting on the department's efforts toward nationwide implementation of health IT since 2005. In prior work, GAO recommended that HHS establish detailed plans and milestones for the development of a national health IT strategy and take steps to ensure that its plans are followed and milestones met. For this testimony, GAO was asked to describe HHS's efforts to advance the use of health IT. To do this, GAO reviewed prior reports and agency documents on the current status of relevant HHS activities.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on GAO-08-499T. For more information, contact Valerie Melvin at (202) 512-6304 or melvinv@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

HHS and the Office of the National Coordinator have been pursuing various activities in key areas associated with the President's goal for nationwide implementation of health IT. In 2005, the department established the American Health Information Community, a federal advisory committee, to help define the future direction of a national strategy for health IT and to make recommendations to the Secretary of Health and Human Services for implementing interoperable health IT. The community has made recommendations directed toward key areas of health IT, including the expansion of electronic health records, the identification of standards, the advancement of nationwide health information exchange, the protection of personal health information, and other related issues. The table shows recent HHS activities in these areas.

Key Areas of Nationwide Health IT Activities

Areas of health IT	Activities
Electronic health records	Defined initial certification criteria for outpatient and inpatient electronic health records and certified 100 products that offer electronic health records.
Standardization	Selected initial standards to address specific areas identified by the American Health Information Community; federal agencies that administer or sponsor federal health programs are to implement the standards, as required by President Bush's August 2006 Executive Order.
Networking and information exchange	Awarded contracts to nine regional and state health information exchanges to begin trial implementations of the Nationwide Health Information Network and to test their ability to work together and to demonstrate real-time information exchange.
Health information privacy and security	Reported the outcomes of a privacy and security solutions contract in a final summary report that described variations among organization-level business practices, policies, and laws for protecting health information that could affect organizations' abilities to exchange data. Developed and made available to the public a toolkit to guide health information exchange organizations in conducting assessments of business practices, policies, and state laws that govern the privacy and security of health information.

Source: GAO analysis of HHS data.

Even though HHS is undertaking these various activities, it has not yet developed a national strategy that defines plans, milestones, and performance measures for reaching the President's goal of interoperable electronic health records by 2014. In 2006, the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology agreed with GAO's recommendation that HHS define such a strategy; however, the department has not yet done so. Without an integrated national strategy, HHS will be challenged to ensure that the outcomes of its various health IT initiatives effectively support the President's goal for widespread adoption of interoperable electronic health records.