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First round of health IT standards harmonization is complete

By Nancy Ferris
Published on January 23, 2008

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The Health and Human Services Department has formally recognized a set of health IT standards it received a year ago, capping a process established by the Bush administration to create a single set of technical standards for interoperability.

HHS Secretary Mike Leavitt accepted the standards for laboratory results reporting, public health reporting for biosurveillance, and consumers management of their own health records in December 2006, but they were preliminary for a year before recognition to ensure they are nearly flawless.

According to the official notice of the recognition, published in the Jan. 23 Federal Register, over the course of the year there were some changes, described as minor or of a technical nature.

Now that the standards are recognized, federal agencies are required by an executive order to incorporate them into new systems or upgrades, or to buy products that comply with the standards. Agencies also must require their contractors to do likewise.

Also, products complying with the standards qualify for exception and safe harbor under the Stark and anti-kickback laws. That exception permits hospitals to give electronic health records (EHR) systems to doctors.

The notice states that the Office of the National Coordinator of Health IT will coordinate and oversee the incorporation of these interoperability specifications in relevant activities among federal agencies and other partner organizations.

However, the process is expected to affect the technical development of EHRs far beyond the

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scope of federal government activities.

Meanwhile, the American Health Information Community has approved another set of interoperability standards and specifications drawn up by the Health IT Standards Panel (HITSP). Those standards cover security and privacy issues that apply in numerous instances of health IT, EHRs for use by emergency responders, allowing consumers access to their EHRs and quality monitoring.

Those standards now go to Leavitt for his acceptance.

The standards generally consist of existing standards developed by other organizations. HITSP selects those standards that will work best for a given use case, or scenario -- a process known as harmonization.

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