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Even among healthcare industry insiders, many people equate the concept of health information technology with integrated electronic health records. Electronic records are certainly the most familiar element of health IT, and the adoption of EHR is clearly the first important step toward realizing the full potential of the clinical and clerical benefits that health IT has to offer. But there is more to health information technology than using computers instead of paper charts to access patient information. Once digitized, health record data become dynamic. No longer stuck in the stagnation of hard copy form, this valuable information can move around, be analyzed qualitatively on a large scale, and become integrated with multiple information sources. Online medical records allow doctors and medical researchers to analyze and present data in new ways, while allowing caregivers to coordinate actions to provide better care. Health IT also always patients to be more fully engaged in their own care decisions.

Health information technology is rapidly developing, and is now in a uniquely powerful position to improve the safety, efficiency, and standards of care in our healthcare system. While innovations such as integrated electronic medical records have made healthcare more convenient for both patients and care providers, the real gains are much more significant. In particular, health IT allows for a significant reduction in medical errors. An intelligently designed and implemented health IT system can help medical professionals identify potential mistakes before they happen. For example, the EHR systems used by hospitals and pharmacies can automatically identify and flag possible interactions between prescribed medications that may cause serious complications.

Another significant benefit of Health IT is improved collaboration among caregivers throughout the entire healthcare system. Physicians, specialists, nurses, and technicians can engage in more immediate and informed dialogue, using digitized health information to paint a real-time, holistic picture of the patientâ€™s state of wellbeing. This collaboration results in an improvement in coordinated action and patient-centric understanding among caregivers.

Finally, emergency care has become dramatically faster and better as a result of the implementation of health IT systems. In emergency care, seconds count. A minute can seem like an eternity, and life-or-death situations are commonly teetering on the edge of time. Health IT allows first responders to perform tests at the site of medical emergencies, and transmit their findings wirelessly to the physicians working in the nearest emergency room. This ability to communicate allows ER doctors the chance to prepare a plan of action, retrieve any necessary medications, and set up medical equipment. Health IT also expedites the accessing of health information for incoming patients. Even if the patient is unable to communicate, doctors can learn of his or her allergies, pre-existing conditions, and current medications. Together these and many other advances in health IT continue to transform the face of medicine.

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