



Don't overlook the role of nurses in the digital revolution

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We are poised to launch a multitude of health IT systems across the nation that will enable healthcare providers to demonstrate meaningful use of electronic health records (EHR). What an incredible opportunity to build on our understanding of information systems, innovation and technology to provide better patient care. But a critical element has been missing in these discussions—the important role of the nurse in this digital revolution.

Nurses constitute the largest single group of healthcare professionals and serve as providers and coordinators of care in every healthcare setting, with nearly 3 million nurses in practice today. In their front-line roles, nurses have a profound impact on the quality and effectiveness of healthcare. They also act on behalf of patients, families and other care providers to promote health, and advocate an environment of patient-centric care. Consequently they must be supported by EHRs that adequately enable their knowledge-based work.

As coordinators of care, nurses are also the focal point for ensuring that data necessary for managing specific patients and populations are not only shared between acute, ambulatory, long-term, community-based, home care, and public health settings but translated into action. Further, nurses are active in education, research and optimization of information systems throughout the healthcare system.

While many nursing educational programs have focused on computer literacy skills, there are relatively few that have incorporated informatics into their curricula. In order to engage all nurses in the unfolding digital era, the Technology Informatics Guiding Education Reform (TIGER) initiative was founded in 2004. Today more than 70 professional nursing organizations, associations, vendors and governmental entities have come together in collaborative teams to adopt the following recommendations:

- Develop a U.S. nursing workforce capable of using electronic health records to improve the delivery of healthcare.
- Engage more nurses in the development of a nationwide health information technology infrastructure.
- Accelerate the adoption of smart, standards-based, interoperable, patient centered technology that will make healthcare delivery safer, more efficient, timely, accessible and efficient.

As a result of the TIGER effort to bring numerous organizations together to craft an informatics agenda, the National League for Nursing and the American Association of Colleges of Nursing have responded with a renewed emphasis on requiring informatics competencies in the nursing curriculum.

To further these recommendations, the Alliance for Nursing Informatics (ANI) has taken a lead role in guiding the nursing profession in the effective use of technology. ANI represents more than 5,000 informatics nurses and brings together over 25 distinct nursing informatics groups in the United States.

In order to achieve the nation's health reform goals, we must leverage sources of IT-competence to ensure that our investment in health IT is installed properly and effectively over the next five years. Informatics nurses bring a working knowledge of how information systems can support and improve upon clinical processes. Because of their combined clinical and IT experience, they are more likely to recognize risks and make sure that IT does no harm. Indeed, their expertise translates directly into the adoption of more effective, higher quality applications that will help us realize the desired outcomes in our healthcare system.

—Joyce Sensmeier is vice president of informatics for the Healthcare Information & Management Systems Society.