Special Audio Transcript

Headline:	Health Care Industry Struggles With Usability of Electronic Health Record Systems

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The health care industry is struggling with usability of electronic health record systems.

This is a special report for iHealthBeat, a daily news service from the California HealthCare Foundation. I'm Kenny Goldberg.

Joseph Scherger is a family physician and vice president for primary care at Eisenhower Medical Center in Rancho Mirage, Calif.

In his 30 years in the business, Scherger has worked in a variety of settings for a host of different medical organizations. He first encountered electronic health records in 1994, when he was introduced to a rudimentary MS-DOS-based system.

(Scherger): "When I first looked at electronic health records, it's like my eyes glazed over, and I just had no intuitive understanding of them. Now I can look at 'em, and actually almost figure them out. And I'm no geek. I'm an average Joe on a computer."

Scherger says the current generation of EHRs is light years ahead of the system he started on, and is vastly superior to paper records.

For example, Scherger says he appreciates the ability to do better charting and tracking of his patients' medical histories on the computer. Still, he says EHRs are not as user friendly as he'd like.

(Scherger): "There's always challenges. And these records are complex because the practice of medicine is complex. But one of the biggest problems is today's coding requirements. In order to get paid, for the time you spend with a patient, the necessary documentation has to be fairly extensive."

And that can take a lot of time.

Some physicians complain the EHR system they're using doesn't save them any time. For example, pediatricians say their systems aren't designed with

young patients in mind. And then there's the general impression that the way EHRs display data just isn't intuitive.

That's why there's an effort underway to push usability to the forefront.

Matt Quinn is a usability scientist at the National Institute of Standards and Technology. His agency is urging the industry to incorporate usability in the design of EHR systems.

Quinn says there's not universal agreement as to what constitutes usability. And he concedes EHR vendors have to balance usability with other demands, like selling their products.

But Quinn points out that user-centered EHR design often is an afterthought in the industry.

(Quinn): "It's a challenge to apply user-centered design retrospectively. It's sort of like forgetting to include flour when you're baking a cake, and then trying to add it later. And that's pretty tough. And it's also tough to hide it with icing."

Quinn says another challenge is that the industry is highly competitive, with more than 1,000 vendors. Collaboration is rare.

(Quinn): "And so, for example, when you jump into a car, you can pretty much know that the brake and accelerator pedals will be in the same places. That's not the case with electronic medical records today."

Quinn's agency has published a series of industry guides, addressing such topics as how to report the results of usability testing. Most recently, NIST published a guide on the concept of evaluating the usability of EHRs in a standard way.

Rod Piechowski is the senior director of healthcare information systems at the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society, a not-for-profit group that advocates for the optimal use of health IT.

Piechowski says EHR vendors are starting to integrate usability into product design. He believes one of their toughest tasks is that not all medical specialties need the same information systems.

(Piechowski): "So they have to develop systems that can help ophthalmologists, for example, do what they need to do, but also help pediatricians do what they do. And somewhere in the middle, there [has] to be a certain level of standardized approaches to the way people and machines interact with each other, in a clinical environment."

The Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT has issued a proposed regulation calling for EHR vendors to use "best practices" in creating their software. The proposal asks companies to implement evidences-based practices on how to engage users in product development and how to define the most efficient ways to use the systems.

ONC's acting Chief Medical Officer Jacob Reider says his agency is not focused on the what, but rather the how.

(Reider): "We say, here's how we would recommend you design a system so that it is most usable."

ONC is gathering public comment on the proposal.

Ultimately, are health providers asking for too much? Are they being unrealistic in demanding that EHRs help them manage all of the complexities of medicine and remain easy to use?

Former National Coordinator for Health IT David Blumenthal doesn't think so.

(Blumenthal): "This is something that will constantly test us because the technology will change, our expectations will change, and whatever the industry's capable of doing, it will be less than the evolving technology makes possible. So, we should be constantly searching for better products, better design, better usability. That will never stop."

This has been a special report for iHealthBeat, a daily news service from the California HealthCare Foundation. If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at iHB@CHCF.org. I'm Kenny Goldberg. Thanks for listening.