Enhancing Health Information Exchange with the FHIM

Introduction, Evaluation, Suggestions, and Next Steps

Executive Summary by:
The Open Group Healthcare Forum

The full White Paper is available here.

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Executive Summary of Enhancing Health Information Exchange with the FHIM
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The Open Group, 44 Montgomery St. #960, San Francisco, CA 94104, USA
or by email to:
ogpubs@opengroup.org
Executive Summary

The efficient and effective flow of secure healthcare information through healthcare systems has been an elusive business and social goal for decades. No country, no healthcare industrial complex, has yet produced a scalable solution to the interoperability problem. As a result, patients continue to have limited access to information about their own health. Clinicians continue to provide care without comprehensive pre- and post-care knowledge about their patients. Healthcare quality suffers and healthcare costs continue to spiral upward. Why is healthcare so far behind other industries in the efficient and effective exchange of critical information?

We acknowledge that healthcare systems are highly complex and the magnitude and scope of common healthcare interoperability is, though daunting, eminently achievable. We recognize that key stakeholders (e.g., providers, payers, vendors) often disagree about how to exchange patient-relevant healthcare information. However, we believe the essential barrier to interoperability is rooted in the fact that the healthcare industry lacks a common, shared language. Fundamentally, a standardized vocabulary is necessary to share healthcare information in ways that consistently and reliably help patients. Thus, for instance, information about a patient’s blood pressure should mean the same among all healthcare stakeholders regardless of the trusted source, and it should flow freely but securely among all people, places, and things integral to a patient’s care.
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This lack of effective standardization in healthcare has several inter-related underpinnings: sometimes there are too many overlapping standards, sometimes there are gaps in available standards, and sometimes there is lack of consensus about best available standards. This problem is not limited to the US. The need to agree on health and healthcare information standards for interoperability has global appeal and begs for solutions that can be implemented globally. The diverse ways nations organize their healthcare systems does not overshadow the international need to develop common standards.

The US federal government has been working on the interoperability problem for many years. There has been a great deal of attention and money focused on encouraging the adoption of electronic medical records to achieve “meaningful use” since passage of the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act in 2009.1 Another key activity for interoperability, far less well known, is the significant work dedicated to creation of the Federal Health Information Model (FHIM). The FHIM is under the direction of the US Federal Health Architecture (FHA) program managed by the Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT (ONC). Late in the summer of 2014, the FHA asked The Open Group Healthcare Forum to perform an evaluation of the FHIM. The FHA wanted to know how good is the FHIM and how useful is it?

The Open Group Healthcare Forum is well qualified to address these questions. The Open Group is a global consortium that enables the achievement of business objectives through IT standards. With more than 475 member organizations, we have a diverse membership that spans all sectors of the IT community – customers, systems and solution suppliers, tool vendors, integrators and consultants, as well as academics and researchers. Our vision is Boundaryless Information Flow™ through global interoperability in a secure, reliable, and timely manner. The goal of our work in the healthcare sector is to enhance access to integrated information to improve health outcomes and to support business process improvements.

The Open Group Healthcare Forum evaluated the FHIM using widely accepted program evaluation methods to conduct focused workshops and detailed dialogs with global private and public sector health and Enterprise Architecture experts. We presented our core findings in a December 9, 2014 presentation to the FHA Managing Board in Washington, DC at the offices of the ONC.

1 Refer to: www.healthit.gov/policy-researchers-implementers/health-it-legislation-and-regulations.
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As a result of its evaluation The Open Group Healthcare Forum commends the FHIM for five main reasons:

1. The FHIM catalogs a large number of key shared information exchange needs …

2. … based on actual scenarios provided by 20 federal partners …

3. … in a structured model populated with consensus-based industry standards.

4. The FHIM documents the model building processes, which is key to building understanding, confidence, and support.

5. The FHIM enhances automation of healthcare data exchange, thus promoting higher quality and efficiency.

The Open Group Healthcare Forum may help unlock immense advantages made possible by increased healthcare interoperability. For this to become a reality, however, federal agencies with healthcare information exchange needs and their private sector collaborators will have to adopt the FHIM, adapt it to their particular exchange needs, and implement it in their core interoperability systems.

Identifying examples of FHIM adoption, understanding barriers to its adoption, and relating the FHIM to other major efforts to achieve healthcare interoperability can be an important step in helping to enabling The Open Group vision of Boundaryless Information Flow. The Healthcare Forum is engaged in this work and expects to publish new insights in the second White Paper in this series, planned for late 2015.
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About The Open Group

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• Capture, understand, and address current and emerging requirements, and establish policies and share best practices
• Facilitate interoperability, develop consensus, and evolve and integrate specifications and open source technologies
• Offer a comprehensive set of services to enhance the operational efficiency of consortia
• Operate the industry’s premier certification service

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