Will Financial Incentives Expand the Use of Electronic Health Records?

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“Yes,” say Lister Hill scholar Nir Menachemi and colleagues, “if physicians’ expressed interest in achieving meaningful use of electronic health records can be converted into active participation. More than 60 percent of the Florida doctors who responded to our survey indicated interest in funding; of those already using electronic health record systems, 86 percent intend to apply for incentives.”

Numerous studies have found that electronic health records can improve efficiency and quality in health care. The Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act of 2009 aims to expand the use of electronic health records by offering financial incentives to physicians to fully adopt and implement them. Incentives became available in fiscal year 2011 and are disbursed through state Medicaid agencies and the federal Medicare program. Knowing the physician or practice characteristics that are associated with a stated interest in applying for HITECH incentives can help policy makers steer limited resources toward encouraging maximum provider satisfaction and thus program success.

Data for this study came from a statewide mail survey of Florida physicians conducted between August and October 2010 which yielded about 2,400 responses for a 27 percent response rate. Several physician and practice characteristics, other than current use of electronic health records, were associated with the intent to apply for incentive payments. Many of these factors, such as larger practice size, physicians’ who perceive themselves as competent computer users, and years in practice, are consistent with previous findings. Among those not planning to seek incentives, costs involved was the most often cited barrier followed by the need for more information.

“We suggest that these findings can inform the Regional Extension Centers working to help physicians achieve the federal meaningful-use criteria that are a condition of receiving the incentives,” say the researchers. “In particular, the centers should focus on providing physicians with information about costs of electronic health record systems. In addition, the perceived value of an electronic health record appears to be an important contributor to the decision to implement an electronic system.”

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