Bridging the Quality Gap
How new clinical analytics tools can empower clinicians to succeed

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Where does all the data go?

Today’s clinicians have more reason than ever before to be passionate about bringing their patients the highest-quality evidence-based care. Even as federal healthcare reform legislation has linked reimbursement to quality and outcomes, it also has provided new sources of funding, such as the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act aimed at supporting clinicians in their efforts to improve care.

Clinicians know better than anyone the transformative power of IT solutions for the healthcare enterprise. Large-scale installations, such as electronic medical records (EMRs) and computerized physician order entry systems (CPOEs) are increasingly commonplace, and the question has now become how best to leverage them to streamline processes and improve care. These IT systems were designed with care delivery in mind, not process improvement; but the information they contain is invaluable to achieving breakthroughs in quality and efficiency.

In any business or operation, the majority of hidden costs and duplicated efforts spring from variation, and healthcare is no exception to this rule—unwarranted systemic variation (that is, variation without any clinical or patient-based justification) is common, but must be eliminated to bridge the quality gap while reducing overall healthcare costs. Clinicians understand that the keys to eliminating this unwarranted variation reside somewhere inside the health IT systems they have implemented to improve care delivery; but a new, complementary IT toolkit will be required to unearth them.

Right information, right time, right place

Clinicians need to make rapid, informed decisions to effectively leverage their resources while delivering world-class patient outcomes. A clinician’s most valuable commodity is time, and with demands pouring in from patients, payors, administrators, and regulators, tools aimed at empowering clinicians to make the right decisions must be tailored to suit their needs. They must make it easy for clinicians to recognize critical, high-priority needs for their patients; must give them greater control over outcomes; and must provide them with an on-demand, real-time snapshot of where unwarranted variations exist in the care delivery process.

Clinicians are motivated to deliver the best evidence-based care to their patients; outcomes are never far from their minds. But without the means to rapidly assess the efficacy of their work, they are unable to rise to the challenges presented by the current atmosphere of heightened scrutiny from every angle: more stringent patient expectations, rising demand, government-mandated reform measures, and ever-escalating costs.

Patients and administrators are depending on clinicians to help bend the cost and quality curves in healthcare, but they cannot do so without the tools necessary to effectively adapt and evolve. For this and the above reasons, it will be paramount that tools aimed at clinician use deliver the support they need to leverage point-of-care data and meet quality goals.
Clinicians need new tools to fulfill their new responsibilities

The lack of such a toolkit has created a gap between what is expected of today’s clinicians and what they are realistically able to deliver. Clinicians are natural stewards of the quality agenda, and are being incentivized by payors both federal and private to demonstrate their adherence to best practices. But to achieve the kind of long-term change to flawed processes that will be necessary not only to sustain but also to build upon incremental improvements to care delivery, they need both a data-driven approach and the intuitive tools to support it.

Federal legislation such as the HITECH Act is driving the widespread implementation of healthcare IT solutions such as EMRs and CPOEs, which have as their primary functions the capture and storage of data. Their shortcoming is that they were not designed to leverage this data in a meaningful way, and most have no means of connecting, extracting, analyzing, and visualizing key metrics and meaningful trends. Although they streamline the care delivery process for clinicians and provide financial and operational tools for administrators, they offer little insight into the variations that drive up healthcare costs while failing to improve outcomes.

Although healthcare organizations often initiate plans to develop customized clinical data extraction and analysis tools, competing priorities and ever-shifting regulatory pressures can easily pre-empt the availability of an enterprise’s IT braintrust, preventing it from collaborating with clinicians to ensure the usability of these tools. Although a sophisticated means for data extraction and analysis may emerge, without attention to the real-world functionality of the tool, it is not likely to be integrated into daily practice by busy caregivers.

Enhanced clinical analytics tools will bridge the quality gap while lowering costs

What clinicians need to bend the cost and quality curves in healthcare are enhanced clinical intelligence tools that fulfill three key goals while supporting the elimination of unwarranted variation:

1. Provide easy, real-time access to meaningful clinical data
2. Perform robust, yet easy-to-understand analysis of this data
3. Empower data-driven decision-making to improve patient care

These tools also must create a platform for true clinical collaboration; they should enable clinicians to work together seamlessly, to achieve rapid consensus on complex care plans with real-time communication, to retain records of their decisions, and to manage their valuable time more effectively.

Perhaps most critical, clinical analytics tools must enable clinicians to visualize their role in the enterprise. By revealing unwarranted variations in care pathways; analyzing patterns by cohorts, patients, services, pathways, and even disease states (especially chronic diseases); and by both revealing historical patterns and predicting future trends, clinical analytics tools can empower clinicians to be true stewards of patient outcomes. With the information they need at their fingertips, clinicians can finally bridge the quality gap—while driving down costs and creating a culture of continual improvement.
Authors

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