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May 2009 FEATURE ARTICLES

From the Editor

The Sunny Side

By Michael McBride, Editor-in-Chief



The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) reported in late 2008 that it had made more than \$36 billion in improper Medicare, Medicaid and SCHIP payments between FY 2006 and 2008. CMS defines improper payments as "those payments that may have been paid incorrectly and do not necessarily reflect fraud." Two days later, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), CMS's parent organization, reported receiving a "clean" audit opinion, similar to a shareholder's report, on its consolidated financial statements for the tenth straight year. Then, HHS in a press release claimed that the clean audit opinion "demonstrates HHS's commitment to effectively steward public funds." First, the government admits to grossly mismanaging public funds and then pats itself on the back for keeping excellent records while doing so? Are they kidding?

I just returned from HIMSS 2009, where the mood was surprisingly upbeat. Attendance had been projected to be down by 30 percent; and coupled with the vague uncertainty created by the obtuse "meaningful use" clause in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), palpable malaise among the vendors pervaded the air. However, that dissipated once the show opened; attendance was much higher than expected and the mood turned decidedly positive, even as the nebulous "meaningful use" clause lingered in people's minds. Attendees seemed oblivious; however, defining it became the primary thrust of every conversation I had with vendor execs at the show; and understandably so, since physicians will need to prove "meaningful use" of their electronic medical records (EMR) in order to receive up to \$44,000 in incentives to promote EMR adoption, which, until HHS defines the phrase, could stall purchasing. Catch-22.

And yet, the general feeling at HIMSS was positive. HIMSS even posted a survey response form on their Web site inviting members to "discuss" the topic and define for themselves the meaning of the phrase. If this results in a HIMSS report, we'll publish the results in *HMT*.

It's debatable whether the stated goals of improved patient outcomes and lowered healthcare costs can or will be accomplished through the government's involvement; however, one thing is certain – the future seems bright for the healthcare IT industry. Change in healthcare is inevitable, and if done correctly, the result could be an IT infrastructure that will take us into the 22nd century and beyond.



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