Wilensky: Major Changes Ahead for Healthcare, But HIM Future is Bright

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After a decade of stable spending, healthcare expenditures are on the rise, according to Gail Wilensky, PhD. If the industry doesn't reexamine its course, we can expect healthcare spending to leap to 17 or 18 percent of the gross domestic product, an increase of up to 6 percent.

Wilensky, the John M. Olin Senior Fellow of Project HOPE, discussed "The Changing Healthcare Landscape" at a Convention general session. She provided a closer look at the factors behind the imminent spending increases.

Ups and Downs of Medicare

Due to the Balanced Budget Act of 1997, Medicare has undergone a period of tumultuous change. Spending slowed more than expected, leading to two major "give backs"—the Balanced Budget Refinement Act in 1999, which was $16.5 billion over five years, and the Benefit Improvement and Protection Act of 2000, which was $35 billion over five years. Now, costs are on the rise.

At the heart of the healthcare system is the controversy surrounding Medicare reform and the need for a prescription drug benefit. Wilensky was not optimistic about the likelihood of either in the near future. "The fact of the matter is, not much is likely to happen," she said, citing a divided Congress.

The potential for reform or major changes to the Medicare program is also hindered by cost. "We should have prescription drugs for Medicare, but we've got to pay for the benefits we've already provided," Wilensky said. "Adding a prescription drug benefit doesn't seem fiscally prudent."

The outlook is not much brighter for hospitals: "There's no doubt that there are some storm clouds on the horizon," Wilensky said. The nursing shortage, new and expensive technology, and of course, the rising costs of prescription drugs are putting pressure on hospitals. Additionally, HIPAA implementation is going to incur significant expenses and there's plenty of debate about how much money it will save.

"Make It Happen"

HIM will be central to addressing all these issues. "There's a lot of uncertainty about future financing, but information systems will be very important," Wilensky said. "The future focus will be on patient safety, evidenced-based medicine, and outcomes. Where we will go on these is nowhere without better information systems."

For HIM professionals, Wilensky offered three pieces of advice: be involved, understand the pressures the healthcare system is facing, and be ready for change.

"I can't imagine a better place to sit than understanding the information systems in your facilities," Wilensky said. "You're in as good a position as I can imagine. Go grab it and make it happen."

Zach: HIM Professionals Connect People, Solutions

In his general session presentation, "Strategic Trends," futurist and consultant David Zach started with an unexpected caution. He warned that no one can say with certainty what the future will bring. "It's not that you shouldn't trust us," he said, "but don't expect futurists to explain all the trends and give you an exact picture of what's going to happen. That's not possible."

Zach, who is based in Milwaukee, WI, and has a master's degree in futurist studies, offered some tips for understanding futuristic thinking:

- Combine ongoing learning with a healthy amount of skepticism
- Study history; patterns that exist today have existed before
- Pay attention to what's happening today; it will affect what happens tomorrow
- Be optimistic; we don't know enough about the future, he said, to be "prematurely disappointed"

Zach encouraged the audience to imagine what technology would be like in the year 2010. "Are we heading toward universal, automated, virtual healthcare?" he asked. Innovations such as microchips, telemedicine, and other technologies make it look that way. But sometimes, he said, technology creates new problems as it solves others. "You can automate the diagnosis process to a certain degree, but you can't automate caring," he said.

HIM professionals play a special role, he said, as they "figure out how we connect people, things, and ideas." In making these connections, they will doubtlessly play a role in designing solutions. He offered a few tips for designing technological solutions:

- Technology should be designed for people, not other technology or "really geeky people," he said
- Design for "attention deficit economics," in Zach's words, in which everything is trying to get and hold an individual's attention
- Pay attention to information architecture, in which information is designed for ease of consumption and understanding
- Design for experience and attitude

In creating solutions, Zach said, listeners should think of themselves as similar to hotel concierges. "Concierges are people who route...[others] to a great experience," he said. "Our society needs to reward that behavior."

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