Electronic platform for cross-facility cooperation

In Austria, as elsewhere, integrated healthcare plays a major role in the national healthcare strategy as laid down in the Austrian Healthcare Structure Plan. Long before the ELGA national EHR* scheme, two large hospital operators pioneered in exchanging patient data across institutions and regions.

Exchanging medical data electronically between healthcare providers is indispensable for patient-centric treatment across specialties and facility borders. In Austria, the implementation of a nation-wide electronic health record called ELGA is finally in full swing. By 2017, hospitals, physicians, care facilities and pharmacies are expected to meet the technical prerequisites for participation in ELGA. But the two largest private, non-profit hospital operators in Austria, the religious order hospital groups Barmherzige Brüder and Vinzenz Gruppe, did not want to wait that long.

Cross-institution cooperation

The Vinzenz Gruppe operates seven hospitals as well as other nursing, rehabilitation and convalescent facilities in Upper Austria and Vienna, while the Barmherzige Brüder operate seven hospitals in Salzburg, Upper Austria, Vienna, Burgenland, Carinthia and Styria. Many patients, especially chronic patients, use several different healthcare facilities with different operators in the course of their treatment. Easy and secure information exchange between these facilities is expected to improve quality of care and bring considerable advantages for patients. That is why in 2003 both groups started to cooperate in cross-institutional data exchange. By September 2012, thirteen hospitals of the Barmherzige Brüder and Vinzenz Gruppe were federated in a single electronic health network of religious order hospitals called "eGOR" (Elektronische Gesundheitsplattform der Ordensspitäler).

The cooperation started as a hospital partnership in Linz, Upper Austria. The local hospitals of both operators developed a platform for jointly accessing patient data and results in electronic form. This cooperation has led to very close coordination between departments of the two hospitals. The institutions reduced redundancies in the services provided and consolidated several units, e.g. laboratory, acute care admissions or catering, thus effectively increasing both efficiency and quality of treatment. As a result of this success, the two religious orders decided to expand their cooperation by creating a mutual electronic healthcare data platform for their religious order hospitals.

Patient benefits

"Patient benefits are central to our initiative for our 'order ELGA'," says Michael Heinisch, CEO of Vinzenz Gruppe. "The electronic health record used by the facilities of both religious orders ensures that unnecessary repeat examinations and other inconveniences for the patients are avoided."

* The electronic health record

For implementing eGOR, both religious orders opted for the IHE infrastructure solution sense® from Siemens Healthcare. The scalable platform is suitable for cross-institutional and cross-sectoral networking of heterogeneous IT landscapes, and supports small healthcare networks, regional cooperations, and national medical care structures alike. The eHealth solution uses networking compliant with standards according to IHE specifications (Integrating the Healthcare Enterprise), interoperates seamlessly with the various hospital information systems of the facilities and also allows connection to province-specific eHealth platforms.

Secure exchange of patient data and results

eGOR enables the exchange of patient data among the hospitals and across federal provinces in compliance with data protection laws. It also provides the basis for connecting to the nationwide electronic health record ELGA which now for its part requires the use of IHE standards as well – not least based on the experiences with eGOR. Data exchange between multiple regions and the connection to the central patient index of ELGA have already been implemented successfully.

Treatment-relevant patient data from the respective hospital information systems (HIS) are published fully automatically on the network. Authorized staff can access required medical documents or DICOM images directly from their HIS. At the end of 2012, eGOR already contained over 1 million results, physician's letters and other documents for more than 265,000 patients. To protect sensitive patient data, a stringent authorization system has been developed in cooperation with the Austrian Data Protection Commission. Data access requires both user authentication and patient consent. Access to released data is only possible within the context of the treatment, effective for a limited time only and logged accordingly.

Adolf Inzinger, Director of the Barmherzige Brüder Order Province Austria, sums up his assessment: "For the patients, eGOR means improved quality of care; for the healthcare system it provides financial relief."

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