DIRECT MESSAGING:
Point-to-Point Communication of Health Information

A primer from the
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Direct messaging, often called “Direct” for short, is a simplistic form of health information exchange (HIE) that allows a health care provider to securely send patient information to another specified health care provider. This information is sent over the Internet in an encrypted, secure way and is commonly compared to sending a secure email. Direct messaging is a component of Meaningful Use Stage 2 for those providers participating in the Medicare or Medicaid Electronic Health Record (EHR) Incentive Programs.

Direct messaging is enabled by health information service providers, or HISPs, that are contracted to manage security and transport for Directed exchange. HISPs can also offer a provider directory, which providers can query to locate Direct addresses of other providers.

**ADVANTAGES OF DIRECT**

- Permits users of a Direct-enabled software tool to send and receive point-to-point messages and attached files from other providers’ EHRs or computer systems regardless of operating system or vendor.
- Facilitates secure, HIPAA-compliant communication between providers and patients using Internet-based software and devices of almost any kind.
- Works well when a provider is referring a patient to another known provider and coordinating patient care in advance of an office visit.
- For sensitive information, such as behavioral health notes and records, Direct messaging ensures that patient data is sent only to pre-selected, authorized providers and is not available in a query-based HIE.

**LIMITATIONS OF DIRECT**

- Direct does not support a model of “pulling information,” or query-based exchange. Therefore, Direct is not a complete interoperability package. Also, information in Direct messages does not populate a patient’s community health record.
- Similar to faxing medical records, information exchanged via Direct may result in members of a patient’s broader care team being inadvertently excluded from important communications.
- Direct may be less efficient and effective than other forms of HIE when coordinating care for patients with complex medical histories, comorbidities, or who are visiting several different specialists.
- In emergency situations, potentially life-saving patient information previously exchanged via Direct is not readily available to EMS or emergency room providers.
FOR PROVIDERS PARTICIPATING IN THE EHR INCENTIVE PROGRAM

Although not the only option, the most commonly used method of information exchange for the Stage 2 Meaningful Use Transitions of Care objective is Direct messaging. Even though an EHR is not required to exchange Direct messages, providers or hospitals working toward Meaningful Use should be aware that certified technology must be used to create and send Direct messages to qualify for EHR incentive payments. That means a certified EHR must be used to create Direct messages and a certified HISP must be used to deliver the messages. In some cases, EHR vendors may be able to provide HISP services.

Please note: If your EHR vendor is not providing HISP services, you will need to select a HISP to enable Direct messaging. Factors such as cost of the service, the size and geographic footprint of the HISP’s provider network, and accreditation status with DirectTrust are all factors in choosing a HISP that will meet your needs for Meaningful Use and beyond.

FOR PROVIDERS WITHOUT AN EHR

Providers do not have to use an EHR to exchange information using Direct. Without an EHR, Direct works much like email through a specially designed Web-based portal. However, unlike most email, it is both highly secure and HIPAA-compliant.

DIRECT MESSAGING ACCOUNTS FOR PATIENTS

Patients may also obtain Direct addresses and use those to communicate with their health care providers. In many cases, online patient portals and personal health record (PHR) applications have built-in messaging tools that are Direct enabled. However, current adoption among patients is low and unlikely to grow before more providers obtain Direct addresses and notify their patients of its availability.

Please note: CORHIO does not provide Direct addresses to patients at this time. Patients wishing to create a Direct account can obtain one through a patient portal or PHR affiliated with a certified patient HISP.

CORHIO’S DIRECT MESSAGING SERVICES

CORHIO offers HISP services and Direct addresses to qualified health care providers, regardless of whether they use an EHR. For providers with an EHR that is not capable of providing HISP services, CORHIO offers EHR-enabled HISP services. For providers without an EHR, CORHIO offers a standalone, Web-based software application for sending and receiving Direct messages. Please contact CORHIO at 720-285-3200 or info@corhio.org for more information about Direct messaging services.

CORHIO is a member of DirectTrust and able to facilitate Direct message exchange with other HISPs with DirectTrust accreditation (using the Medicity HISP platform). HISP connectivity is expanding rapidly, so for the most up-to-date HISP connection status, please visit www.corhio.org.
COMPLEMENTARY METHODS OF HEALTH INFORMATION EXCHANGE

There are two additional forms of HIE available to Colorado providers that help to supplement the Direct method of exchange: query-based and results delivery.

1. **Query-based exchange** – allows qualified participating health care providers to access a patient’s comprehensive, longitudinal health record. CORHIO calls this the *Community Health Record*. The information in the longitudinal record is sourced from all of the data-sending participants of the HIE. This is especially helpful for new patient appointments and emergency visits, however it may also be helpful for returning patients with multiple care providers where coordination is challenging. This service is available via CORHIO’s PatientCare 360® application.

2. **Results delivery exchange** – allows a provider’s EHR to automatically and seamlessly send or receive information for their patients without the need to use separate, manually operated software or systems. This is the most convenient type of HIE, though it requires an interface, or technology connection, to be built between the EHR and the HIE.

Both query-based and results delivery forms of HIE are available through CORHIO. Some providers choose to use all three forms of HIE simultaneously, including Direct, depending on their patient population and needs. Often, responsibility for monitoring or accessing different forms of HIE will be divided among office staff members or departments in the provider’s office/facility based on roles and workflow.

For more details about query-based or results delivery, please contact CORHIO at 720-285-3200 or info@corhio.org.