Can Large Companies Set Health Tech Standards?

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Some of the largest companies in the healthcare industry are working on a frame work that they hope becomes the industry standard for how to protect medical information. But can these companies succeed where others have failed simply because of their size?

The security of health information is a pressing issue, especially as the industry increasingly adopts electronic medical records. While there are laws that require everyone who comes in contact with patient information to treat it securely, the laws leave it up to each organization to come up with their own definition of secure. This means that organizations have to either audit one another's security practices to make sure that information won't fall into the wrong hands or accept that they have adequate security on faith. A typical midsize hospital might have hundreds of these agreements.

Clearly there's room for a common security standard. The Business Technology Blog talked to several healthcare execs about this new effort, which is being coordinated by the newly-formed Health Industry Trust Alliance (HITRUST). Their hope is that the new security framework, which they expect to be completed by the end of 2008, becomes widespread enough that instead of audits or faith-based security, organizations can simply say that they are HITRUST certified and that will be enough. The analogy that kept coming up was PCI, a set of security standards that credit-card companies require merchants to follow.

There's one obvious problem with that analogy: Credit-card companies can refuse to process payment requests from merchants who don't follow their standards. It's not practical for a pharmacy, a hospital, a health-insurance company or the other parties involved in HITRUST to cut off doctors or organizations that don't embrace their framework.

A couple of medical-technology types this blog talked to expressed skepticism that HITRUST could emerge as the industry standard for just this reason. They thought it was a good idea and a worthy project, but that ultimately it would compete with all the other security standards that are out there.

The big unknown – and the question that interests us the most – is whether big companies can force an industry to adopt a standard more or less by virtue of being big.