

# IT In Scrubs

BY: KIM NORTH SHINE, 8/5/2010



It is called the new frontier in medicine - Health Information Technology (HIT)- and those who ventured into the field years ago will tell you the economic Back 40 is wide open and so unexplored that sometimes it feels like the Wild West. Big dreams, heavy federal government intervention, and a grand plan to wrangle a stampede of patient information into one national system is being carried out by the horsepower of computers, software, and whatever other technological ammo can be wielded by posses of tech-savvy entrepreneurs.

Mindy Richards is one of HIT's early settlers. As founder of [ChangeScape](#), a health industry consulting firm in Birmingham, she's watched the medical information landscape transform as government requirements for collecting electronic health records has gone from debate to mandate.

"It really is like the Wild Wild West. We're right at the beginning of something new and unknown. It's very exciting to be a part of it," Richards says by phone, on her way to speak to physicians about how to get their offices into compliance with the [HITECH Act](#). It details the new electronic health system guidelines put out by the [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#), which recently announced the incentives and penalties in store for health-related practices that don't comply.



The overall goal of the new system is to bring down medical costs and increase patient care and safety. Getting there means beaucoup business for Richards and her

kind.

"We're growing as we speak," says Richards, a former hospital CEO who started ChangeScape in 1995. With the help of investors, a new division launched in February. ChangeScape Technology advises physicians specifically. Since its formation, 14 people have been hired and more are on the way. ChangeScape consultants work in Michigan, Indiana, Ohio and, soon, Illinois.

"It's an upper Midwest business model that emanates from Michigan," says Richards, who was born and schooled in Michigan. She sees health information service companies like hers giving the state an major economic shot in the arm. "I'm very excited to be part of Michigan's recovery," she says.

While many doctors might choose a different adjective--confounding, cumbersome, costly-- to describe the new system, there is no denying that a wealth of jobs and opportunities are being created.

It takes personnel, knowledge, and money to design electronic systems to collect medical and billing information from patient records. Whether it's analytical data to target disease treatment and prevention or an open-books approach that lets consumers shop around for the best prices, technological platforms must be capable of connecting to other systems.

Consultants like Richards and Joe Dylewski, owner and president of [ATMP Consulting Group](#) in Belleville, can hardly keep up with the demand from physicians, "who just want to treat their patients, not figure out technology," Dylewski says. ATMP hired 10 employees in the last year and plans to bring on another 10-15 people over the next year to work with physicians around the state.



"I'm being conservative because the opportunities are there," says Dylewski, who was previously business development director for Michigan health care at [Compuware](#). "With the amount of work out there, with the way the water is rising we all need to work together. There is more than enough work to go around, and we have to work together to help the doctors get this done." Already, colleges and universities are adding health information technology courses to their curriculum. Hospitals and health systems are hiring too, to try to keep up with the massive technological needs.

[Beaumont Hospitals](#) and [TrinityHealth](#) employ hundreds in information technology: 280-300 local employees at Beaumont's hospitals and 1,455 nationwide at Trinity, which operates 46 hospitals in nine states, 14 of them in Michigan, including the St. Joseph Mercy Health System in southwest Michigan. Trinity, the only national health system headquartered in Michigan, has 65 job openings nationwide. Beaumont has a dozen or so available positions.

The high tech demands also have hospitals investing in infrastructure, including separate data centers to ensure information is protected and accessible at all times.

Subra Sripada is chief information officer for Royal Oak-based Beaumont Hospitals. "The use of technology in healthcare as compared to other industries has been lagging...For a longtime it was more of a backroom keep the lights on kind of thing," Sripada says. Now it's moved to the front of the house. "It's gone from an operational entity to a strategic asset."

[Electronic Medical Records](#) have been around a long time - ordering tests by laptop instead of paper in a tray, for example - but their use has been limited and expensive.

"People shied away from implementing it. The last five years they have really picked up," he explains. "ObamaCare pushed it along and now with the incentives and penalties things are really picking up."

What needs to be done - and the 865 pages of regulations to follow - is too lengthy to detail here, but in a nutshell it creates a system where all patients have one health record that follows them wherever they go. The idea is to let doctors and hospitals share information more easily, quickly, and reliably. It also ensures that every caregiver who interacts with patients has complete access to their treatment history. In the past, continuity of care could too easily be derailed by a change of doctors, nurses, and even hospitals. These electronic records could also prevent redundant, wasteful diagnostic tests, and check for medication errors and interactions - a practice which is common at Trinity and Beaumont. Separately, in what's known as informatics, patient records could be culled to detect health trends in certain communities and to help target the best place to invest in health care.

"All of those advances in technology are connected to the IT structure of the hospitals," Sripada says. "The organization that meets the demands are the ones that are going to succeed."

While some hospitals and health systems began their system changes five to 10 years ago, the momentum is moving into private practices and other health care providers. "Government is the final nail here," he says. "It's forcing everyone, not just some, to pay attention."



HIT will be built into the curriculum at the new medical school to be opened by [Oakland University](#) and Beaumont Hospital next year. Medical students will work hands on with HIT in its hospitals, Sripada says. "What they'll be learning will be vastly different from what their parents and professors learned."

Novi-based Trinity Health is seen as a leader in the HIT field. Jim Elert, Trinity Health's chief information officer, has been involved in hospital IT since 1976. It was then known as data processing, but the high-tech world of records loomed ahead.

"Even in the '80s we were talking about electronic medical records," Elert recounts. "When I started, lab systems was pretty much the only thing that was automated. That and the billing system. There were people then who had the vision. What's happening now is the Holy Grail."

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