Chapter III

Providers

Learning Objectives

- Distinguish the types of healthcare systems serving middle-class families, poor families, and military personnel
- Diagram the major components of a hospital information system and indicate at least two subcomponents of each
- Describe the flow of information in patient management
- Demonstrate how characteristics of patient information peculiar to a clinical unit, such as radiology, lead to unique characteristics of the information system underlying that system
- Compare a typical suite of offerings from a major healthcare information systems vendor to the functionalities that a healthcare provider needs
- Distinguish the software needs of a small group practice from those of a large hospital

The official definition of a healthcare provider is broad. It encompasses institutional providers such as hospitals, nursing facilities, home health agencies, outpatient facilities, clinical laboratories, various licensed healthcare practitioners, and durable medical equipment suppliers. Any individual or organization that is paid to provide healthcare services is a healthcare provider.

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Populations

Understanding the healthcare industry in the United States is vital to understanding how information systems serve that industry. In particular, healthcare for middle-income families, poor families, members of the military, and veterans is provided by very different healthcare systems, which, in turn, will have different information systems needs. There is not any single “American healthcare system.” There are many separate subsystems serving different populations in different ways. Sometimes they overlap; sometimes they are entirely separate from one another.

Four subsystems of healthcare in the U.S. address four different subpopulations. These subpopulations are (Torrens & Williams, 1993):

- Regularly employed, middle-income families with continuous programs of healthcare insurance
- Poor, unemployed or underemployed families without continuous health insurance coverage
- Active-duty military personnel and their dependents
- Veterans of U.S. military service

An endless set of variations is possible from different combinations of these four. Additionally, the diverse types of healthcare systems in the United States relative to the populations that they serve will be outlined.

Middle-Income Families

The most striking feature of the employed, middle-income system of care is the absence of any formal system. Each family puts together an informal set of services and facilities to meet its need. The service aspects of the system focus on physicians in private practice. The system is financed by nongovernmental funds.

For public health needs the family benefits from the services of public health departments for services like sewage disposal. Those public health services that target the individual, such as vaccinations, have to be arranged by the family through the family physician.

Ambulatory patient services are also obtained from private physicians. When laboratory tests are ordered or medications prescribed, private for-profit laboratories or pharmacies are used. Typically the patient pays some of the cost of these services out-of-pocket.
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