Pros and cons of the iPad in health care settings

Can the iPad be incorporated into health care networks without breaking security requirements? In this exclusive resource, get answers to some of the most common questions about using iPads in health care facilities.

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Although tablet computers and netbooks have been around for many years, the debut of Apple Inc.’s iPad in 2010 stirred a lot of excitement -- and some angst -- in the health care industry. Hospitals and providers are testing iPad use in emergency rooms, exam rooms and waiting rooms. Health care CIOs are trying to figure out whether this consumer device can be integrated into the hospital network without breaking any privacy or security rules. Competitors are getting their own devices on the market, some offering features important to the health care industry that the iPad lacks.

This guide answers common questions about iPad use in a health care environment, and takes a look at other tablet devices that might compete with it. It is part of SearchHealthIT.com’s Briefings series, which is designed to give IT leaders strategic guidance and advice that addresses the management and decision-making aspects of timely topics.

What are the iPad’s prospects as a tool for health care?

So far, in its first year of production, the iPad has been popular with health care providers. This is not too surprising, as doctors, nurses and other practitioners have been using the iPad’s older sibling, the iPhone, for several years, for everything from voice recording to clinical data entry. Many argue that the iPad's larger screen sets the stage for even more clinical uses.

The device has also proven popular in medical academia. The Stanford University School of Medicine has announced it will put an iPad into its welcome package for all incoming students. While the iPad might not be the hands-down winner for health care, it's definitely a strong contender.

What are the iPad’s pros and cons in a health care setting?

Like any device, the iPad has pros and cons associated with its use in health care.
Several characteristics explain the rapid pace of iPad adoption among health care providers:

- The iPad is roughly the same size as patient charts.
- It has a large screen that can be used to share information with patients.
- The price makes it affordable for physicians.
- It can run all the medical apps available on the iPhone.
- It can be used to enter data into EHR and computerized physician order entry (CPOE) systems.

On the other hand, problems associated with iPad use in health care include the following:

- It might not be durable enough, and is difficult to disinfect.
- It does not run Flash, the Adobe Systems Inc. platform on which the majority of the Web's video is developed.
- It does not support USB devices or printers.
- It has no camera.
- Its free-form factor could give rise to ergonomic issues and security breaches -- though these issues could arise with the use of any tablet device.

**Can hospital IT networks support iPad use?**

Some health care CIOs are getting inundated with requests they support iPad use. The wildly popular iPhone has already made inroads into the corporate world. This has paved the way to some extent for network support of iPad adoption. However, some IT administrators argue that iPads and iPhones, and their thousands of apps, cannot be centrally managed, thus opening the door for security breaches.

Virtualization could be the answer to some of the iPad's network support problems. Citrix Systems Inc. used an iPad to access a Windows 7 environment even before the device was released. The iPad has definite potential as a thin client, but any health care organization looking to support it must adhere to all the standard measures for enterprise security, especially if the device will be used to access patient data.
Can iPad’s be used with an electronic health record (EHR) system?

Many health care providers would love to use an iPad to access their EHR system, but this often is easier said than done. Vendors have been slow to develop native iPad EHR applications and in the meantime, most iPad users have to settle for "terminal" setups that function like desktop-sharing applications.

Entering data into an EHR system using the iPad also has been a challenge for some providers, who find the touch-screen keyboard difficult to use for data entry. Some EHR vendors are trying to overcome this obstacle by creating an iPad-friendly interface for their software that minimizes the need for typing.

One vendor, ClearPractice LLC, has developed an iPad EHR system using the Software as a Service model. Other EHR vendors are likely to put the iPad on their list of supported devices as well.

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