The healthcare challenge

Today's healthcare environment calls for information sharing on an unprecedented scale. No where else in the world can a patient receive more advanced treatment than in the US, but the infrastructure surrounding our healthcare system needs to be fixed. Problems are embedded in the work processes and lack of adoption and use of technology, and patients, doctors, nurses, deserve and can build a better system.

According to The Chasm of Quality from the Institute of Medicine:

- Between 44,000-98,000 Americans die from medical errors annually
- Medication-related errors for hospitalized patients cost roughly $2 billion annually
- Medical errors kill more people per year than breast cancer, AIDS, or motor vehicle accidents

The statistics are sobering. As President Bush said in the 2006 State of the Union address, “We will make wider use of electronic records and other health information technology, to help control costs and reduce dangerous medical errors.” Indeed, a common framework for interoperability, based on open vendor-neutral standards, is needed to enable secure information sharing, simplify organizational processes, improve system performance, and reduce costs. This framework must allow for privacy and integrity safeguards across all sectors, with strong support for HIPAA standards.

Consider the realities that medical professionals faces today:

- It’s 2 a.m. You’re here.
- Your medical records are locked away here.
- The ER doctor has 2 minutes to decide which one of these two injections won’t cause a lethal allergic reaction.

About the Liberty Alliance

The Liberty Alliance Project is a global alliance of companies, non-profit and government organizations developing open standards for federated network identity, interoperable strong authentication and Web services. Liberty Alliance is the only global identity organization with a Public Policy Expert Group (PPEG) offering guidance and best practices on privacy within all Liberty deployments. Liberty Federation, which consists of ID-FF 1.1, ID-FF 1.2 and SAML 2.0 specifications, offers organizations and consumers a more convenient and secure way to control online identity information and is deployed worldwide by organizations that include American Express, AOL, BIPAC, Ericsson, General Motors, France Telecom, Nokia, NTT and Sun Microsystems. Membership is open to all commercial and non-commercial organizations. A full list of Liberty Alliance members, as well as information about how to become a member, is available at www.projectliberty.org.

This is just one of a handful of real situations faced daily as the medical community grapples with understanding how to establish an interoperable, secure, regulation-supporting solution.
The federated identity solution
At the core of the interoperability solution is the concept of federated identity. Federated identity helps establish a virtual network of organizations and participants through authentication and single sign-on across domains. In a federated environment, identity information resides “locally” but can be linked together to be used “globally”, allowing healthcare providers, insurance companies, pharmacies, public health agencies and even individuals to share information securely while protecting PHI.

Federated identity offers many solutions, for both patients and providers without compromising security or control over PHI:

For Patients:
- Convenience of single sign-on
- More control over privacy and PHI
- Improved access to relevant medical information
- Ease of dealings with healthcare providers & payers
- Improved patient trust and quality of care

For Providers:
- Reduced medical errors and better patient outcomes
- Better and more services, new revenue opportunities
- Improved access to relevant medical information
- Improved operating efficiencies that reduce costs
- Standardized, interoperable architecture reduces IT costs
- Easier, faster HIPAA compliance
- Improved patient trust and quality of care

Introducing the Liberty Alliance
The Liberty Alliance is a consortium of more than 150 diverse member companies and organizations (government agencies, enterprise end-users, technology vendors, etc.) developing open standards that anyone can implement. Founded in early 2002, this worldwide group has a vision of a networked world in which individuals, businesses, organizations and institutions can more easily interact and collaborate with one another while respecting the privacy and security of shared identity information.

The Liberty Alliance recognizes that the challenges related to identity are not just about technology. Public policy and business experts are involved with the Alliance, creating documentation and best practice guidance for public policy compliance, privacy concerns, business requirements (including vertical, industry-specific needs), and interoperability conformance testing and certification. The knowledge of these experts is infused at the definition stage of the business challenge, assuring that the specifications created have a strong focus on security and privacy.

Liberty Solutions for Healthcare Needs
Liberty provides critical federated identity management “plumbing” standards that:

1. Support the 3 key elements of NHIN interoperability:
   - Non-proprietary interoperable authentication of individuals and devices
   - Record locator service to provide directory of records across all constituent sub-networks
   - Enforcement mechanism to assure standards compliance by participating sub-networks

2. Make it much easier for patients, providers and payers to share results of authentication
   - Securely
   - In a controlled manner
   - Easily

3. Enable easier, faster HIPAA and other “best practice” compliance
   - Access control
   - Audit control
   - Authorization control
   - Entity authentication

How You Can Get Involved
Liberty is collaborating with federal agencies (ONC, AHIC), standards development groups (HL7, HITSP), healthcare industry groups (HIMSS, IHE), and regional health information organizations (RHIOs) to integrate federated identity into a National Health Information Network. Our work, with a special interest group exclusively focused on healthcare, is advancing daily. We welcome your involvement.

For more information please visit: 
http://www.projectliberty.org/resources/featured_verticals_health.php