

Will This Little Piggy Take HIT To Market?

Posted At : May 8, 2009 10:00 AM | Posted By : Kristina Mulholland

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Swine Flu has increased awareness of the need to improve public health reporting systems and integrate with electronic health record systems (EHRs).

Public health officials are aggressively responding to the recent and expanding outbreak of Swine Flu, whose scientific name is H1N1 Flu. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (**CDC**), in the US, as of May 7, 2009, there have been 896 confirmed cases in 41 states and two deaths. Supplemental funds, totaling \$1.5 billion, have been requested by the president to fund disease tracking, surveillance and monitoring efforts; however, it is too early to designate the use of the funds at this time.

This public health emergency has highlighted the role of information technology (IT) in providing disease management tools, real-time data, demographic data, trending capabilities and information dissemination. Integrating disease registries with EHR systems provides an opportunity to enhance preparedness, expedite tracking and reporting of diseases, and prevent the spread of disease. As officials mitigate the Swine Flu pandemic, emphasis will be placed on unifying surveillance architecture to improve data collection productivity. **Questions** are being raised as to whether the heightened attention to surveillance and disease tracking systems will last. In the past, attention and funding were thrown at the anthrax attacks and SARS outbreak, but quickly faded, leaving behind gaps and according to some experts, inadequate systems. Some say the stimulus funding may provide the answer.

The economic stimulus package allocates \$19 billion for several health IT provisions, including \$17.2 billion in Medicare and Medicaid EHR incentive payments for hospitals and physicians demonstrating meaningful use. The funding may help spur growth to improve public health systems and integrate with EHRs, making public health part of the broader health IT agenda. Vendors with EHR solutions should make certain of the system's ability to incorporate and integrate with biosurveillance systems and registries. Further, the emergency creates opportunities for disease management vendors and EHR vendors to forge partnerships.