

Thinking Out Loud... Less Is More

“When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth!”

—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Elizabeth A. Evans

Elizabeth Evans is CEO of Health Informatics, Inc., Richmond, Virginia, the parent company of AMI Healthcare Systems Group, which has been providing clinical and financial software solutions for dialysis facilities and physician practices since 1981, and of HMG, which provides outsourced billing capabilities to dialysis facilities, physician practices, and emergency rooms.

Do you ever feel as if you are drowning in information because you cannot lock out the virtual world from converting your mind into a victim of too much communication? Communication that infiltrates your brain's neurons and circulates among them almost at will—invasive e-mail, persistent voice mail, and omnipresent electronic news—surgically implanted into the medium of choice?

Collectively, they hammer our consciousness. When we are not their focus, others who use them are. Their cell phones and walk-about conversations attack our tranquility as we try to bar our ears from their words, often punctuated with noisy laughter or loud, irritating tones. Even in places of worship, we are asked to turn off our cell phones until we leave, yet many times we still hear that familiar *r-r-r-ring!*

The world we live in has become a gigantic conversation pit, a cyclotron of data bits colliding within our lowly brain. Do we dare turn off the clatter for a while? If we do, will we miss something important? Perhaps our recourse is to construct an invisible wall around our mind in order to insulate it from intrusive beeps, loud rings, penetrating chatter, and clanging notices of alerts. Who would have

thought that the silent swoosh of electrons would be so loud.

This is the backdrop for an event that occurred between December 26, 2003, and January 16, 2004, as well as for one that took place on February 26, 2004. The former was a time when I threw up the white flag and gave in to the flu despite zealous hand-washing, diligent nutrition, and the all-powerful flu shot. The latter was a retirement party for a clinician who only wanted to help people.



The question is, “How can caregivers responsibly separate important data from the less important?”

Too Much To Do, Too Little Time

During those three weeks while under the weather, I received more than 450 new e-mails and a stack of journals and industry papers that piled high on my desk unread, and countless voice mails. My list of

undone tasks became neon-lit with the words, “Alert! Person Under Stress!” That alert propelled longer hours to back-fill unaccomplished productivity... but surprisingly, the longer hours worked translated into less efficient, more error-prone work than anticipated. There was too much to do in too little time. What to do!?

How often I have heard the same words from those in the renal community: “I have too much to do in too little time.” When their day ends, data follow them wherever they go... home or play, night or day. Their need is our company's vision—to provide quality information solutions with integrated communication across the care team (patients, nephrologists, renal nurses and technicians, billers, social workers, dietitians, administrators)—a vision we believe will ultimately protect both caregivers and patients.

The question is, “How can caregivers responsibly separate important data from the less important and distinguish ‘white noise’ from actionable events without personally looking at all the facts all the time?”

The answer is for them to define their own electronic alert and advisory rules. In this way, they can deliberately focus their decision-making process within a virtual lens instead of spreading their

attention across all facts on an equal basis, afraid they will overlook something important. The latter approach, looking at all facts all the time so as not to overlook an important piece of data, is exhausting and, because of fatigue or time pressures, a clinician may miss an important fact. A computer system, however, is indefatigable and reliable. It will consistently report actionable items when designed to siphon data through intelligent filters and report only the information that requires attention.

Clinicians who use electronic exception reporting (such as our system module, Maestro®) find that when they use it as their standard documentation, research, and ordering tool, they are almost on “autopilot,” because it furnishes them context-sensitive information at the point of need. As a result, they can work on behalf of the patient instead of hunting and pecking for the data to do so... not too different from non-clinical management relying on high-level reports to keep abreast of what has happened, what is happening, and what will most likely happen in their industry in the near and long term. Exception and high-level reports literally confine electronic communication within the virtual boundaries we establish.

No Electrons in Sight

February 26, 2004, marked an event that represents a direct communication without any electronic intervention. The event? The retirement party of an unnamed person who, remarkably, worked for only one dialysis organization for 25 years. While the 25 years are noteworthy, what was most impressive about the party was the diversity of the group that came to pay her honor.

The group consisted of her family—her husband and sons, her mother and sisters—and of clinicians such as physicians, renal nurses, and technicians. It also represented billers and administrators in addition to industry representatives and CEOs of companies doing business in the renal market. All came together as a community, a team of colleagues, who wished to be there *in person*, not electronically via e-mail or voice mail, to celebrate the service, accomplishments, and spirit of this individual.

As the party drew closer to its end, a group huddled around her... touching, smiling, and acknowledging. She smiled in silent acceptance. It was a smaller group than the one that began the party, yet it seemed larger. While this was taking place, I spoke with her mother who, in response to my recognition of her daughter, stated simply, “All she wanted to do was help people. That was all she ever wanted to do.”

Less Is More

The familiar adage, “Less is more,” is true as long as there are more details to support the less. If there are not more details to support the less, we reverse our power over actionable events and become victims of too little information and too many guesses, taking for granted what is presented without the ability to drill down into the supporting details.

The optimum balance in a communication-driven world is not to construct an invisible wall around our mind, but to construct a data-rich, standards-based computing environment that we ourselves intelligently manage so that the swoosh of electrons remains silent and is always productive. **D&T**