

# Healthcare

## THINC RIO and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act

*Thinc Rio's new executive director explains how the stimulus package will help the adoption of electronic medical records*

BY DEBBIE KWIATOSKI

THINC RIO has been on the forefront for years, quietly working with doctors, hospitals and health insurers to streamline their records systems and enhance the quality and usability of patients' medical histories by getting into one integrated inline electronic system. They met with some success, being designated as one of the country's pilot projects for such a system three years ago – and with that designation came some federal and state funding. It enabled them to begin to build a secure network and to educate the regional health community on the benefits of a secure, integrated, online records system – even if installing that system throughout the region would initially cost over a hundred grand for each office. Even so, by the beginning of this year, the valley had 21 percent of all potential players converting their old paper records to electronic ones.

Enter Susan Stuard, THINC RIO's new executive director. Having worked her career in on the technology development side of healthcare, she seems to be the proverbial "right person at the right time" to complete the vision of a truly secure, interactive electronic home for everyone's medical records.

As Stuard explains it, the system being envisioned today would be set up very much like a securitized internet, with large servers in hospital centers providing ISP capacity for a capillary-like network of

doctors, clinics, labs and specialists to key into. This is, she noted, probably the most cost-effective way to handle such a system.

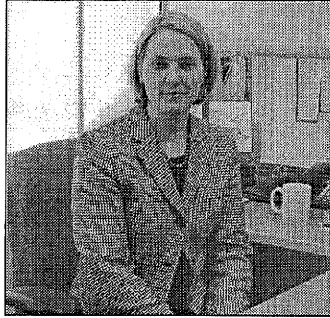
Stuard, who was last the Director of Technology Policy at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital and holds an MBA from Yale's School of Business, is also well-positioned for taking best advantage of new funds that are becoming available through the federal government's stimulus funding.

"The Hudson Valley is a very special place," she commented at a recent interview, when asked why she left Columbia Presbyterian to come up and run THINC RIO. "It is incredibly well-positioned to be on the forefront of making EMR (electronic medical records) the norm."

Why?

Well, while there are huge healthcare corporations on the west coast, like Kaiser Permanente, these systems are not what is typically found throughout the rest of the country. Kaiser, she explained, was a great

example of developing a vertical kind of alignment for insurance, healthcare delivery and record keeping. They directly hire the doctors, specialists, clinicians, lab



workers and all the administrative personnel. They own and run their hospitals and clinic facilities and have created a system where their insured clients go through their closed healthcare system. That system, not surprisingly, employs EMRs to handle the record keep-

ing and it is very cost-effective. But it is not the U.S. norm.

Most regions of the United States operate on a healthcare system that is anything but integrated and vertical in its alignment. There are independent doctors, independent hospitals and labs and independent health insurers...all of whom more or less network with each other to form another sort of integrated system. That, she stresses, is exactly what is going on in the Hudson Valley. And that more horizontal network is what has to be

accommodated in the country, if we are ever to truly get to a well-functioning electronic medical records system.

Why is that so important?

Because when the doctor you are sitting in front of has access at a keystroke to your medical history, your allergies, your prescriptions, the tests that have been done, etc your doctor is in a much better position to give you high quality care – and by not repeating tests or prescribing drugs that could have bad interaction with each or taking longer than is necessary to come to a true diagnosis of a problem, not to mention the huge savings in administrative office costs, healthcare costs come down...way down.

That's why the region's health insurers are listening, and working with THINC RIO to develop the new reality of EMR.

"We are working with people like CDPHP, MVP, Empire...United Healthcare, Hudson Healthcare...all of them," said Stuard. "They see how this is going to help get healthcare costs down, while at the same time providing even better care."

Building the valley's EMR system is also going to be funded in some part by both the stimulus packages passed by Congress and the President's healthcare policy initiative. Depending upon their caseload's demographics, even individual doctors will be able to access funding from these programs, said Stuard.