

The Obama administration has offered extra Medicare payments of up to \$44,000 per doctor for “meaningful use” of a “certified” electronic health-record system and \$2 million bonuses to hospitals.

But in a world where technology changes at warp speed, will the newly named coordinator of the program, David Blumenthal, M.D., certify technology that is flexible and innovative enough to keep up with fast-changing medical and information systems?

Current technologies, write Kenneth D. Mandl, M.D., of Children’s Hospital in Boston and Isaac S. Kohane, M.D., of Harvard Medical School, can be expensive and rigid. Big decisions need to be made up front to prevent hospitals and doctors’ offices from buying the medical equivalent of VHS video-tape technology in a world that eventually might go Blu-ray.

“Ideally, system components should be not only interoperable but also substitutable,” Mandl and Kohane say. They cite as a model the

Computerized health care records may seem like a worthy goal, but will technology be flexible and innovative enough to keep up with quickly evolving medical and information systems?

Apple iPhone, which has a software platform that allows users to download new applications and toss out old ones. And information should have “liquidity” and “substitutability”—at least at the level of an ATM—so that a doctor could use billing software from one vendor, a prescription-writing program from another, and a laboratory information system from a third. Competition and innovation might flourish if vendors could specialize.

To prevent physicians from becoming “scribes,” regulations must ensure that new electronic systems exhibit a “realistic respect” for physi-

cians’ time, Mandl and Kohane write. A RAND Corporation study in 2005 estimated that electronic health records could save up to \$77 billion annually through reduced hospital stays, avoidance of duplicate or useless tests, better drug utilization, and other efficiencies. But physicians also must see a direct benefit from mastering the new technology if they are to be motivated to use it to the fullest.

Blumenthal outlines “huge challenges,” in an article that appeared only five days after he was named to the program coordinator position. He says that many of the electronic records systems that have already been certified are neither user friendly nor likely to improve quality and efficiency in the health care system. Tightening the certification process is a “critical early challenge,” he says, but if the requirements are set too high, doctors will lobby to change the law or just forgo the bonus and hunker down to accept the penalties.

ARTS & LETTERS

Gilded Vestibules

THE SOURCE: “Rolling Out the Unwelcome Mat for Visitor Centers” by Martin Filler, in *Architectural Record*, March 2009.

THE OPENING OF THE \$621 million subterranean Capitol Visitor Center in Washington luckily passed almost unremarked last December. Otherwise, writes archi-

tecture critic Martin Filler, this star-spangled boondoggle might have received star billing in the *Guinness Book of Pork*.

Designed to protect lawmakers in the wake of the shooting deaths of two Capitol policemen in 1998, the 580,000-square-foot underground lobby, security checkpoint,

history gallery, and food service complex purports to ease public access to the Capitol building. Actually, writes Filler, a regular contributor to *The New York Review of Books* and other publications, it does just the opposite. The opportunity for visiting families to roam the halls and spot a lawmaker they recognize from C-SPAN is a thing of the past. Most visitors’ Capitol experiences are now confined to the annex, where they wait in line for their tours and eat in the cafeteria. Extensive exhibits, also located in the annex,



Washington's cavernous new Capitol Visitor Center is three-quarters as big as the Capitol itself.

show the building of the Capitol and illustrate the workings of the government with contemporaneous letters and other documents.

Ten times the size of the White House, the new visitor center is part of a trend toward "interpretive" interventions in historic precincts. "Visitor centers subvert credibility through the extra degree of separation they impose between viewer and artifact," Filler contends. The Liberty Bell Center in Philadelphia, he says, makes the authentic Liberty Bell look fake. George Washington's pristine Mount Vernon estate suffers from the "dreadful impositions" of the new Ford Orientation Center and the Donald W. Reynolds Museum and Education Center. The Mark Twain House in Hartford, Connecticut, which Samuel Clemens lost through foolhardy investments, is threatened with being lost again as a result of spending on an "overinflated" and "misproportioned" annex. Money is now being raised in a misguided effort to build a visitor center at Washington, D.C.'s elegantly evocative Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

Enough, says Filler. Visitor centers are a "pointless, wasteful building type we'd be well rid of."

ARTS & LETTERS

The Grammarians Have No Clothes

THE SOURCE: "Fifty Years of Stupid Grammar Advice" by Geoffrey K. Pullum, in *The Chronicle Review*, April 17, 2009.

AFTER 50 YEARS, THE INFLUENCE of William Strunk and E. B. White's *Elements of Style* is not to be denied by us.

If that sentence makes you cringe, you are either a well-grounded grammarian or, more likely, part of the legion of college graduates who regard Strunk and White's slim volume as the essential guide to English usage. In Geoffrey K. Pullum's opinion, the book does not deserve its enormous esteem. Not only has it "not improved American students' grasp of English grammar; it has significantly degraded it."

William Strunk Jr. taught Eng-

lish at Cornell University in the early 20th century, and privately published the first edition of *Elements of Style* in 1918. Many years later, when Strunk's student, E. B. White, wrote a nostalgic piece about his former professor for *The New Yorker*, he was invited to revise and expand the style guide for commercial publication. As Pullum reports, "It took off like a rocket (in 1959) and has sold millions." But Pullum, coauthor of *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (2002) and head of linguistics and English language at the University of Edinburgh, says the book's popularity was unfortunate, "because both authors were grammatical incompetents. Strunk had very little analytical understanding of syntax, White even less," even though, as Pullum acknowledges, White was a skilled writer, author of, among other books, the much-admired *Charlotte's Web* (1952).

Proof of Strunk's and White's shortcomings as grammarians can be found throughout *Elements of Style*, Pullum says. "Use the active voice," the authors command in one of the book's most familiar sections, even as they admit that the passive voice is "frequently convenient and sometimes necessary." But Pullum finds it troubling that the bias against the passive "is being retailed by a pair of authors so grammatically clueless that they don't know what is a passive construction and what isn't." Three of the four examples used to illustrate its evils are *not* passive constructions. (In "The reason that he left college was that his health became impaired," *impaired* is "fingered as passive"