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A Day in the Life of
Lac Tran
Senior Vice President/CIO and Dean
Rush University Medical Center

As CIO, Lac Tran Helps Support Rush's Game Plan

Lac Tran's office window at Rush University Medical Center looks out onto an unmistakable Chicago landmark – the United Center, where the city's professional hockey and basketball teams play.

Tran has little time to notice the view, or worry about sports. Rush has deployed an electronic medical record system in its inpatient hospital, but many challenges lie ahead. It's rolling clinical systems out to the physician practices that are affiliated with it, and it plans to have 700 physicians online by June 2012. He is senior vice president, CIO and an associate dean at Rush.

Rush is also in the midst of building a new facility, which will incorporate new technology – for example “smart” beds and sensors and digital I.V. devices that will feed information directly into the EMR. That will help eliminate the chance for human error when such results are manually recorded now.

These new approaches will help to incorporate clinical decision support systems and apply artificial intelligence, which will be able to predict when patients' results indicate care interventions are needed to prevent a decline in their conditions. In Tran's world, IT helps clinicians by giving them the tools to make better decisions.

“We want to notify the caregiver or the attending physician on the condition of the patient in the bed, rather than waiting for (medical rounds) to occur,” he said. “We want to be more proactive.”

Expanding the use of information technology in healthcare settings takes more than just putting technology in place. Tran's daily work includes building relationships and meeting the needs of a wide range of clinicians and others who work at Rush.

“My job more involves setting strategic direction,” he said. “It starts with an assessment of what we have and looking down the road to our strategic direction for clinical care or educational research. Then, we look at the technology trends and then plan out IT strategic planning to feed into that, to enable us to achieve our vision.”

Rush's vision – to become a center of choice in Chicago and one of the prominent medical centers in the world – is causing it to pay increased attention to patient safety in receiving medical care and the patient experience in its interactions with the facility. Tran says much of his job is to help Rush's leaders, by devising the tactical plan that will support it.

Tran also is responsible for the day-to-day IT operations that keep information flowing at Rush – getting the right data to the right place at the right time. In early clinical implementation, that requires improved data collection by caregivers, but that's only the start, as Tran sees it. Collected clinical data then can be analyzed, which is where the use of IT in healthcare really begins to pay off, he believes.

continued,

“We can use data as an enabler; you can begin to see patterns of practice, and particularly the patterns of practice that produce better outcomes,” he said. “Now you can drive yourself toward evidence-based treatment rather than just relying on memory or ‘the way we’ve done it in the past.’ That is part of the CIO’s job.”

Tran sees the shift to electronic health records as an essential component of reform of the healthcare system; no such effort will succeed unless patients assume more responsibility for their health, and that will best occur when patients take control over their medical information.

“Electronic health records and personal health records are not going to be successful unless you and I, the patients, take over control over the record, just like we did with our financials,” he said. “Until then, we really don’t have a society that will reform healthcare.”

In Tran’s opinion, information is key in the paradigm shift that needs to occur for healthcare to become more efficient and effective.

“If you look at the continuum of care, you have the patient as one common element; they go through treatment and they get care. The second part of the healthcare system that’s common to every disease and every treatment is the information,” he said. “If your vision is to make the patient healthier, you have to have solid information systems to support it.”

Tran came to healthcare with a background in math and statistics. As part of a team at the University of Dayton Research Institute that performed fatigue research on crews involved in long flights as well as astronauts on space missions, he ultimately became involved in aerospace medicine. From there, he was invited to assume a CIO position at a military hospital. Since then, his passion has become making healthcare delivery better.

“Once you get in it, you see it’s so way behind compared to the scientific world or the business world, and

you see so much of the opportunity to change the way we deliver healthcare,” Tran said. “There are a lot of other opportunities based on my background where I could go out and make more money, but I have a tendency to devote myself to change the way we deliver care. That’s my passion.

“Nothing is as rewarding when you see people discharged healthy and happy,” he continued. “I used to work for a pediatric hospital. Sometimes, when you get depressed about your job or you think the world treats you unfairly, I would go to the ICU and see these tiny little babies hooked up to these machines, trying to struggle for life. It gives you a different perspective and gives you more energy to not get wrapped up in your own problems.”

Rush is beginning to see results in benefits from its clinical record implementations, including reductions in medical errors, efficiencies in drug prescribing and streamlined workflows. It’s early in the process of analyzing benefits from its systems, Tran said.

Referring back to the unmistakable United Center within his view, Tran offers an analogy of his role as a CIO trying to meet the needs of the high caliber of health professionals that Rush attracts.

“As a CIO in an organization, I usually compare myself to a basketball coach who has 10 superstars on the basketball team. You have to divide your attention accordingly and give them enough ‘time to play.’ Otherwise, they get mad and they quit and you can’t sell tickets anymore, and you lose your championship and credibility.

“What I do as an administrator is basic: I work with all of them, and the best way to do that is to try to walk in their shoes,” he continued. “I do rounding with them; I attend their staff meetings. To be successful in such a complex environment, you have to start from the grass roots, as well as generate support from the top. Many of these goals simply originate from relationship building.”

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