

## **HIT still not getting the patient's story**

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Federal HIT policymakers have dedicated themselves to moving the healthcare sector away from paper and into the digital future.

There is, of course, no shortage of practical objections to the move on the part of doctors, but one retired physician offers what may be the clearest articulation of what, on a more fundamental level, is causing doctors to drag their feet.

Here's the money quote:

"The computer is oversold as a tool to improve health care, implement reform, cut costs, and empower patients. The reasons are obvious to anyone who treats patients. You cannot look a computer in the eye. You cannot read its body language. You cannot talk to an algorithm. You cannot sympathize or empathize with it.

We physicians are not Luddites or troglodytes. We are savvy about using the Internet, technology applications, and social media. For us, medicine mixes art and science. What we seek from patients are clues, constellations of signs and symptoms, and stories. We choose not to be reduced to data-entry clerks sorting through undigested computer bytes.

A string of numbers containing demographic, laboratory, and other patient information, no matter how systematically assembled or gathered, is not narrative. It does not tell a story. It contains 'just the facts,' as Sergeant Joe Friday used to say.

That is why an ophthalmologist told me that when he gets an EHR summary, he ignores it: 'It does not tell me the patient's story. It does not tell me why the patient is here, what troubles the patient, and what the referring doctor wants me to do.'"

EHR technology will keep advancing, but we can't help but suspect it's going to be some time before that core objection is put to rest.