ORGANIZATION:
Gold Standard and Informed Decisions

PROJECT NAME:
KatrinaHealth.org -- Online Prescription Records Access for Hurricane Katrina Evacuees

Summary
To prevent a public health crisis in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina created by wide-spread gaps in evacuees’ medication regimens, Informed Decisions, LLC created a single source of information on the medications used by those displaced by the storm. Through this source, pharmacists and physicians could access current prescription drug information for emergency and ongoing refills, ensuring continuity of evacuees’ medication therapy.

Introductory Overview
When four hurricanes made landfall in Florida in 2004, the Gold Standard team that would lead Informed Decisions when the subsidiary launched the following year assisted in disaster relief efforts by focusing the company’s eMPOWERx™ wireless patient care program on affected areas, providing additional wireless handheld units to pharmacists and physicians to ensure they had access to their Medicaid patients’ prescription medication information and e-prescribing tools. When Hurricane Katrina made landfall along the Louisiana coast, Informed Decisions, which had been in the process of implementing eMPOWERx in Mississippi, leveraged its experiences in Florida to aid Mississippi Medicaid beneficiaries displaced by the storm. Within five days of Katrina’s impact, the company had expedited implementation and rolled out a web interface, providing authorized users in shelters, pharmacies, and healthcare facilities with online access to information critical to the care of evacuees, including current medication histories, a medication identification tool, preferred drug lists, and e-prescribing capabilities. Clinical decision support tools, which alerted users to potential drug interactions and therapeutic duplications, were also integrated into the system.

Ultimately, a comprehensive source of prescription drug information was created to effectively ensure that Mississippi Medicaid beneficiaries did not suffer an interruption in their medications.

Recognizing the need to also assist non-Medicaid Mississippi residents who relocated across the country in the aftermath of the storm, and to reach evacuees from neighboring Louisiana,
Informed Decisions further repurposed the eMPOWERRx infrastructure and developed the front-end web interface that became KatrinaHealth.org.

The site, specific to Hurricane Katrina evacuees, featured a more intuitive interface, broader data fields, and expanded prescriber information in order to accommodate use by non-Medicaid providers and for non-Medicaid patients.

The expansion of the program to include hurricane evacuees from Mississippi and Louisiana required an unprecedented collaboration of private companies, public agencies, and national organizations. Working with the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Informed Decisions played an integral role in bringing together these important multiple entities, ensuring the most comprehensive prescription history information possible was available for more than one million impacted lives.

Informed Decisions worked in collaboration with SureScripts™ of Alexandria, VA to acquire and consolidate dispensing data from chain pharmacies and RxHub of St. Paul, MN to obtain additional prescription data from pharmacy benefits managers. The Veteran’s Health Administration (VHA) also provided data on its beneficiaries, marking the first time in history it had opened its information to an outside company.

The VHA’s willingness to provide outside access to its data was largely due to Informed Decisions’ reputation for the secure handling of confidential information, including the use of VeriSign’s managed public key infrastructure (MPKI) technology, the highest level of electronic security available, and VeriSign Server Certification.

SureScripts and RxHub electronically transmitted prescription drug data to Informed Decisions, which validated, integrated, and staged the information – segregated by source for tracking purposes – across Informed Decisions’ servers for use by authorized providers. Searches for patient records were conducted based on five patient demographic criteria; if a patient appeared in records from more than one source, the provider was able to view all records on one screen.

To ensure compliance with HIPAA data privacy and security provisions, any provider wanting access to the patient data on KatrinaHealth.org needed to be credentialed and their identities authenticated. Retail pharmacists were verified jointly by the National Association of Chain Drug Stores (NACDS) and SureScripts, independent pharmacists by the National Community Pharmacists Association (NCPA), and physicians by the American Medical Association (AMA).

Within two weeks of the hurricane’s landfall, a beta site was launched for use by registered healthcare providers in key shelters in Mississippi, at the Houston Astrodome, and by the VHA, which had three impacted bases, to support its fieldwork.

On September 22, 2005, testing on the beta site was complete and the full-scale launch of KatrinaHealth.org took place.

In addition to a 90-day snapshot of evacuee prescription histories, the robust system alerted users to patient allergies and provided a medication identification component that allowed providers to identify tablets and capsules by querying the database using unique characteristics such as color, shape, and imprints/markings.

By the end of September, KatrinaHealth.org users had performed nearly 4,000 information searches on patients, with independent and retail pharmacists being the most frequent users,
performed 84% of the searches. In all, more than 6,000 patient information searches were performed between September 2005 and February 2006.

**Benefits**

KatrinaHealth.org aided victims of Hurricane Katrina and ensured continuity of care for evacuees by providing physicians and pharmacists with a single, secure source of current prescription medication information for more than one million patients. In all, KatrinaHealth.org included data on more than 4.5 million medications.

Implementation of this system helped protect the long-term health of evacuees and mitigated the risk of a widespread public health crisis by ensuring evacuees did not suffer from a disruption in their medication regime.

KatrinaHealth.org fundamentally changed the way patient medical information is utilized in disaster relief efforts by laying a framework for the compilation of data from multiple sources into a centralized database, where it can be efficiently and securely accessed to improve the quality of care given to individuals displaced by natural disasters.

This innovative system has established a blueprint which will enable a faster, more efficient response to future disasters, preventing disruptions in medication use, potential prescription errors, and adverse drug events.

**The Importance of Technology**

Information technology played a critical role in the success of KatrinaHealth.org, enabling the electronic transmission of prescription data from the partner organizations to Informed Decisions for validation, integration, and deployment across a secure server. The intuitive web interface provided access to that data from any computer with an Internet connection and a browser supporting 128-bit SSL.

The operating environment consisted of:

* Server: Windows 2000/2003, IIS 6.0 (ASP.NET), Microsoft SQL 2000
* Security: Firewall, Server Certificate (VeriSign 128 bit SSL), VeriSign Managed PKI, VPN & Remote Desktop
* Operational: Help Desk, Registration Web Site, Certificate Administration Portal, Data Update System

Information technology made it possible to expedite the collection and deployment of diverse batches of data from multiple sources, efficiently credential and authenticate users, and maintain a high level of security.

Overall, the success of KatrinaHealth.org served to raise the profile of health information technology in the pharmaceutical industry by establishing a framework that will help ensure continuity of care in the aftermath of a natural disaster.

**Originality**

David J. Brailer, M.D., Ph.D., National Coordinator for Health Information Technology with
the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services states that KatrinaHealth.org “is the first of many … efforts to develop new tools that will make a real difference in the lives of people.”

A project of this scope had never been undertaken, and KatrinaHealth.org marked the first time the pharmaceutical industry played such a visible role in disaster relief efforts.

Success

Due to the collective efforts of Informed Decisions and its KatrinaHealth.org partners, the role of health information technology as a conduit to comprehensive patient records in disaster relief has been solidified and an effective framework for a national repository of prescription medication information has been established. The lessons learned from this experience have paved the way for a faster, more efficient response to future disasters.

Informed Decisions’ foremost goal of protecting the health of thousands of evacuees by preventing disruptions to their medication regimes was met. A central source of current prescription medication information was created, ensuring continuity of care and preventing a widespread public health crisis.

Difficulty

Informed Decisions and its KatrinaHealth.org partners faced several significant challenges before the site could be launched, including medication regulations that vary from state-to-state, inconsistencies in health policies, and disparities in privacy regulations.

Another key challenge was ensuring only authorized providers gained access to the prescription data, which required credentialing by the organizations representing physicians and pharmacists.

A collaborative approach between all partners, both public and private, ensured these challenges were met and allowed critical medication information to be made available to healthcare providers caring for evacuees in a timely manner.