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## **IT consolidation could promote standards adoption**

Consolidation is here. And that's good news for physicians.

If there was any doubt concerning the first point, this week's [announcement](#) that Allscripts and Misys Healthcare Systems would merge put it to rest. The merger is the biggest we've seen in a while—and as a longtime supporter of our Allscripts electronic health record, I think it's a good thing—but in fact, consolidation in healthcare information technology has been going strong for years. There were 443 mergers and acquisitions in 2005 and 471 in 2006, according to industry reports. I haven't seen the final tally for 2007 but you can bet it will be even higher.

Why is that good news for physicians? To start with, as a physician and chief information officer for a 22-provider practice near Atlanta, I believe the number and variety of vendors in the marketplace stands in the way of widespread adoption of technology standards, turns comparison shopping into a full-time job, and makes true interoperability nearly impossible to achieve; all of which discourages physicians from adopting life-saving technologies such as an EHR.

To encourage broader physician adoption of EHRs, the Certification Commission for Healthcare Information Technology, on which I serve as a commissioner, certifies products that meet minimum standards for functionality and interoperability. Our hope is that certification will make it easier for physicians to select an EHR, and speed the adoption of data standards. In a sense, CCHIT is an attempt to accomplish through market pressure the same thing that consolidation will accomplish—more standardization of operating systems and data standards that make true interoperability a reality.

The hockey great Wayne Gretzky offered a bit of advice that's relevant here. "I skate to where the puck is going to be, not to where it has been," Gretzky said. Today, interoperability is more a catch phrase than a reality for most IT vendors—but it's where we're headed, and consolidation is helping. Take the case of Allscripts. Two years ago the company acquired A4 Health Systems, the original maker of our practice's HealthMatics EHR. In doing so, Allscripts inherited A4's hospital Emergency Department Information System and care management products, both of which broaden the reach and standardization of clinical information from the physician's office to the hospital and on into post-

acute extended-care providers. Eventually, I assume all 110,000 physicians using Misys systems will be able to interface with the 700 hospitals using these systems, not to mention the 40,000 physicians using other Allscripts products. So, in one swoop, the merged company will have extended interoperable solutions to 150,000 physicians—about one-third of all U.S. practicing physicians who focus on patient care—and thousands more clinicians in hospitals and post-acute facilities.

The value of connected, standardized and interoperable healthcare IT systems is clear. Real-time information and connectivity help physicians provide superior care for their patients at a lower cost (our own practice won the prestigious HIMSS Davies Award of Excellence for demonstrating how our EHR saves more than \$1 million a year and, more importantly, helps us track quality-of-care outcomes). Yet, as a group, physicians have been all too slow to adopt this life-saving technology. To encourage more of them to get off the sidelines and into the game, we need to continue to push for acceptable standards through CCHIT certification. And we need to hope that consolidation in the marketplace continues, so that those companies who thrive by providing great technology and service will continue to grow and deliver those benefits to more physicians.

The bottom line is that Allscripts has been and will continue to be a leader and, as they say, “leaders lead.” They have shown a sincere commitment to connecting healthcare that I’ve personally appreciated, and this merger brings that dream one big step closer to reality.

*James Morrow, M.D.*  
*Vice president*  
*Chief information officer*  
*North Fulton Family Medicine*  
*Alpharetta, Ga.*