A THOUGHT LEADERSHIP ROUNDTABLE

From Matching To Meaning: The CIO Imperative For Trusted Identity and AI-Ready Data

CHIME DIGITAL HEALTH LEADERS

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The session was led by Russ Branzell, CHIME's President and CEO, and sponsored by Verato, whose CEO Clay Ritchey joined the discussion. The CHIME members participating in the roundtable were:

Matt Kull
Chief Information Digital Officer
Inova Health System

Jonathon Manis
SVP & Chief Information Officer
CHRISTUS Health

Craig Richardville
Deputy Chief Information Officer
UF Health

Chero Goswami
Chief Information and Digital Officer
Providence

Karen "K" Marhefka
Deputy Chief Information Officer
RWJBarnabas Health

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THE IDENTITY TENSION: FOUNDATIONAL IMPERATIVE VS. STRATEGIC PRIORITY

In an era defined by aggressive digital roadmaps and the imperative to leverage AI, healthcare leaders face a paradox: The foundational element enabling all advanced transformation — trusted patient identity — is often treated as a solved or "good enough" function.

The discussion, moderated by CHIME President and CEO Russ Branzell, focused on the critical shift from identity management as a back-office cleanup function to identity intelligence as the non-negotiable nucleus for all patient-centric care, revenue integrity, and AI readiness.

"The very nucleus is that we must have the right patient correctly identified with all the right data, data attributes, data connections, everything, for us to be able to do anything effective, especially involving AI," Branzell said, framing the conversation.

Participants universally agreed on the importance of this foundation yet acknowledged the strategic tensions within their organizations.

Jonathon Manis, SVP & Chief Information Officer at CHRISTUS Health, cut straight to the implicit trust gap, saying, "I think the public probably assumes that when a patient walks in, the care team knows who that patient is and that he or she has one medical record, not two or three medical records across the system. Many would be surprised to learn that may not be the reality."

Craig Richardville, Deputy Chief Information Officer at UF Health, highlighted the industry's current state of readiness for AI regarding data volume. "As an industry and as organizations, we are very data-rich," he said. "However, the true foundation for AI relies on having that data cleansed, governed, and aggregated."

Richardville then addressed the challenge of prioritizing this infrastructure retrospectively. "The question becomes: How do we raise the house to pour the right foundation underneath it?" he asked, using an analogy to describe the industry's technical debt. "While the foundation should have been our first step, it likely wasn't — but it is necessary for us to address."

This reactive posture was echoed by Karen Marhefka, Deputy Chief Information Officer at RWJBarnabas Health. "Due to the excessive number of requests for AI, we have been in reactive mode, leaving little opportunity to set a more strategic AI direction. In moving to a more proactive stance, Identity is not a pay-attention-to-me term we are hearing about."

THE IDENTITY TENSION: FOUNDATIONAL IMPERATIVE VS. STRATEGIC PRIORITY CONTINUED

Finally, Chero Goswami, Chief Information Digital Officer at Providence, added a crucial social barrier, noting, "The other side of that coin is privacy. As soon as we say we need to better know the identity of the person, there's a part of society that says, 'You're infringing on my privacy.' There are a lot of these 'myth busters' we need to overcome."

REFRAMING IDENTITY AS A STRATEGIC ENABLER

For CIOs further along in digital transformation, trusted identity is viewed not as a utility, but as an explicit component of consumer-facing growth strategies.

"I believe every hospital is trying to provide a fully differentiated lifetime care experience," said Matt Kull, Chief Information Digital Officer at Inova Health, explaining how longitudinal care necessitates identity intelligence. "To do this, you need an accurate and comprehensive longitudinal record. The basis for that is going to be having a single definitive and consolidated digital identity record of the human that you're caring for."

Kull detailed how identity enables key strategic initiatives. "I look at the other investments that we're making, like we're implementing Adobe Journey Optimizer," he said. "I must know that the same person that I just sent this marketing effort to or this outreach to is the same person who showed up. If I can't correlate the two of them, then all the investment in consumer journey tracking goes away."

Marhefka provided a clear analogy for the strategic shift that identity enables. "Are we pitchers or catchers?" she said. "Fundamentally, we're catchers: You're sick, you come to us. We're not pitchers: You're going to get sick, and we're going to solve it before it happens. We need this identity foundation to help us make this shift."

Exemplifying this shift, Goswami explained how his initial internal skepticism was quickly overturned. He noted that while he previously would have stated identity management was not a top priority, doing a mental fishbone diagram (a visual tool for root cause analysis) helped him connect identity to broader strategic goals, specifically realizing how a trusted identity foundation is a critical enabler for top-line strategies like patient access and revenue. "By itself is it going to be a top five strategy? No, but it is going to become a foundational imperative for many of those top-line strategies, access."

Reinforcing this market shift, Clay Ritchey, CEO of Verato, noted that identity becomes a top priority when it's linked to strategic inhibition. "For many of our customers, delivering exceptional patient and provider experiences to drive growth was a strategic mandate that was being inhibited due to fragmented identity challenges, ultimately piquing their urgency to solve the problem that drives everything else, knowing who is who," he said, "You have to fix the foundation. And then everything else follows."

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CEO
Verato

REFRAMING IDENTITY AS A STRATEGIC ENABLER CONTINUED

Ritchey added that industry investment trends support this shift: "62% of all the new investments last year were data analytics and AI. We believe that identity has to be part of the foundation."

THE COST OF INERTIA AND THE OWNERSHIP DILEMMA

The consensus was clear: The financial and human costs of relying on "good enough" identity — whether it's managing a 2% or 4% duplicate record rate — are vast and largely unquantified.

Manis pinpointed the core difficulty in building a business case for identity. "This is a pain we have become accustomed to, and we really don't know the cost," he stated. "We've never quantified the cost, and we don't have a good idea what the potential savings might be as a result of doing something like this."

The group also grappled with establishing clear ownership, acknowledging that without an owner, no strategic initiative can succeed.

"This highlights a critical operational gap in our sector," Richardville noted. "As healthcare evolves into a consumer-oriented model, identity management requires the direct oversight of the C-suite."

Richardville emphasized the risks of fragmented ownership. He noted that without centralized governance, identity intelligence lacks accountability.

"Currently, identity responsibilities can be siloed," he explained. "Centralizing this function is essential to capitalizing on the opportunity it presents."

However, the panelists also explored a split ownership model:

- Kull suggested credentialing (owned by the CMO) for provider identity, and registration (owned by the CFO/Rev Cycle) for patient identity, as these are the roles that secure funding.
- Goswami focused on the most pressing organizational crisis: "I would start with the Chief Revenue Officer (CRO), from a registration standpoint, when selling this to the C-Suite, because then it becomes a revenue generation or revenue protection. Revenue generation margin protection is a crisis right now in our industry."
- Marhefka backed a partnership model: "You can't have one without the other. To establish one single person who's over that, I'm thinking it is whoever those two people [the identity foundation owner and the growth/marketing officer] report to."

GOVERNANCE: SAFETY, QUALITY, AND EDUCATION

Defining authority is one step; defining standards for execution and accountability is another. How can organizations embed identity standards to ensure sustained quality and safety?

The group strongly agreed that governance should be centered on quality and safety.

GOVERNANCE: SAFETY, QUALITY, AND EDUCATION CONTINUED

"This is probably also a quality and safety issue and should potentially be governed as such because right patient, right data is incredibly important," Kull recommended. "If I am a mismatch and create a second record of me but they don't realize I'm allergic to penicillin, now I'm a safety risk."

Manis stressed the need for proactive communication. "On the governance side, I think the primary opportunity is for education," he said. "It is very difficult to sell a solution to a problem that no one knows exists. Educating the governance structure about both the opportunity and the risk is going to be critically important for effective oversight and governance."

FUTURE WISHLIST: THE IDENTITY POWER MOVE

The roundtable discussion wrapped up by envisioning the future, with a "power move" twist — If the expert panelists had the ability to immediately make one critical shift to solve the identity crisis, what would they target?

- Goswami would focus on institutionalizing the risk: "I would change the awareness aspect and put this under a preventable harm category."
- Marhefka would create an accountable structure: "A new position in the organization that is responsible for this."
- Richardville proposed a federal solution: "We need to ensure that we are all required to use a unique identifier across all services."
- Kull prioritized communication: "I believe the messaging is just not right yet… it doesn't have that just that punchy crisp, this is what it is and exactly why you have to have it message."

Ritchey offered a foundational change to the technology landscape: "I would love for provider IT organizations to revisit their tech stack reference architectures with an increased focus on building an identity intelligence service to unify data across their complex data ecosystem."

The future of identity management might start with a vision of a universal standard driven by public-private partnership. Branzell said such a standard has helped other industries like the utility market.

"Who has any concern about plugging into that electrical outlet right there? The answer is nobody. Who owns the standard for that? It is a public-private partnership," he said, drawing an analogy to universal electrical standards everyone implicitly trusts. His mandate: "This is how we're going to do it: Everyone does it, or you can't provide care."