

Issue 2021-2

ONC HEALTH IT STANDARDS BULLETIN

MAY 2021

The ONC Standards Bulletin is a periodically published communication for healthcare stakeholders that includes updates about ONC health IT standards initiatives.





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Race and ethnicity data are important for many uses, such as informing effective treatment and patient care, improving healthcare outcomes, research, and, identifying and eliminating health disparities to improve health equity. Race and ethnicity data are also critical to informing national priorities, including efforts to advance racial equity and to support underserved communities including “people of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality”.¹

This ONC Standards Bulletin 2021-2 (SB21-2) describes the specific capabilities health IT certified through the ONC Health IT Certification Program must have with respect to capturing and exchanging granular patient race and ethnicity data. These capabilities have been widely implemented² in health IT certified to ONC’s 2015 Edition certification criteria, are widely used in ambulatory and inpatient settings, and allow for the electronic capture, exchange, and use of race and ethnicity data.

Advancing Health Equity Opportunities Through the Use of Certified Health IT’s Race and Ethnicity Capabilities and Codes

ONC recognizes the potential for data-driven technologies, including certified health IT, to impact health equity. Further, ONC recognizes that “structural inequalities, biases, and racism in society are easily encoded in datasets,” and that data science practices using race and ethnicity data “can reinforce existing social injustices, and health inequalities.”³ We note the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality issued a request for information entitled: *The Use of Clinical Algorithms That Have the Potential To Introduce Racial/Ethnic Bias Into Healthcare Delivery*⁴ and we anticipate public comments will help inform future health IT work in this area. Through this Standards Bulletin, we seek to highlight the race and ethnicity standardized terminology and technical capabilities that are present in ONC-certified health IT.

All health IT certified through the ONC Health IT Certification Program to the “demographics” certification criterion ([45 CFR 170.315\(a\)\(5\)](#)) must have the capability to record race and ethnicity at a detailed level of granularity consistent with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) [Race & Ethnicity—CDC](#) code system. This code system includes more than 900 concepts for race and ethnicity, which gives patients very specific options for self-identifying their demographic information. The 900 concepts are organized in a way to eventually “roll up” to the Office of Management and Budget’s (OMB) minimum categories for race and ethnicity⁵, which can support aggregation and reporting needs when the OMB standard is necessary. Health IT certified to the “demographics” certification criterion is required to support both of these standards, code multiple races and ethnicities for a patient, and be able to perform the roll up from granular races and ethnicities to the OMB categories.ⁱ

Healthcare providers interested in fully leveraging this functionality can and should work with their health IT developer to specify how they would prefer to record race and ethnicity to support the populations they

ⁱ For further information, please see the 2015 Edition preamble for further information on the “demographics” requirements <https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2015-25597/p-228>

serve. Through this functionality individuals can report their race and ethnicity in a manner that most closely aligns to how they self-identify, for example, Japanese-Indian as opposed to Asian American.

The following includes additional information about the ONC demographics certification criterion as it relates to race and ethnicity data:

- A certified Health IT Module must be capable of recording each one of a patient's race and ethnicity codes, including multiple race and ethnicity selections, in accordance with the CDC Race and Ethnicity code system.
- There is no minimum number of selections required to be available from the CDC Race and Ethnicity Code Set beyond those included in the OMB set. All five of the OMB race standards are included in the CDC Race and Ethnicity Code Set.
- The certified Health IT Module must be able to aggregate each one of a patient's race and ethnicity recorded to the OMB race and ethnicity categories.
- Certification criteria do not specify how many of these CDC Race and Ethnicity Code Sets must be displayed. This is left to the developers in concert with the end users in specific care settings to determine how the user interface is designed.
- A certified Health IT Module must be able to demonstrate that it can record whether a patient chose not to provide information for a race, an ethnicity, or both.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: Is there a minimum number of selections required to be available from the CDC Race and Ethnicity Code Set?

A: There is no minimum number of selections required to be available from the CDC Race and Ethnicity Code Set beyond those included in the OMB set. During certification testing, however, any of the concepts for race and ethnicity may be tested. Please refer to the [Demographics Certification Companion Guide](#)⁶ for further explanation.

Q: How does ONC ensure Race and Ethnicity are included in Exchange?

A: Race and ethnicity data elements are part of the [USCDI](#), which is stewarded by ONC and sets the national floor for certain standardized health data. The USCDI is required as part of several different exchange-oriented certification criteria.

Q: How is race and ethnicity data exchanged electronically?

A: Please see the Health Level 7 (HL7) FHIR® [US Core Patient Profile](#) and HL7 [Consolidated Clinical Document Architecture \(C-CDA\) Companion Guide](#) for more information on how health IT developers are using HL7 standards to exchange race and ethnicity consistent with ONC's certification criteria.

Q: Does certified health IT Race and Ethnicity standard terminology and codes support CMS electronic Clinical Quality Measures (eCQMs)?

A: CMS eCQM reporting requires the inclusion of race and ethnicity data of the affected populations when this information is available at the time of measure calculation.

ONC Resources/Helpful Information

Resource	Link
Certification Criteria	https://www.healthit.gov/topic/certification-ehrs/2015-edition-cures-update-test-method
Certification Companion Guide (CCG)	https://www.healthit.gov/test-method/demographics
USCDI	https://www.healthit.gov/isa/sites/isa/files/2020-10/USCDI-Version-1-July-2020-Errata-Final_0.pdf
Interoperability Standards Advisory	https://www.healthit.gov/isa/representing-patient-race-and-ethnicity

References

¹ Exec. Order No. 13958, (Jan 20, 2021). “Executive Order On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government.” <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/20/executive-order-advancing-racial-equity-and-support-for-underserved-communities-through-the-federal-government/>

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT. Data Brief. Feb 2021. https://www.healthit.gov/sites/default/files/page/2021-03/Hospital%20Use%20of%20Certified%20HIT%20Interop%20v10_1.pdf

³ Knight, H.E., Deeny, et al. “Challenging racism in the use of health data.” *Lancet Digital Health*. Feb. 3, 2021. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2589-7500\(21\)00019-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2589-7500(21)00019-4)

⁴ Use of Clinical Algorithms That Have the Potential To Introduce Racial/Ethnic Bias Into Healthcare Delivery. AHRQ. Feb 2021. <https://effectivehealthcare.ahrq.gov/products/algorithms-bias-healthcare-delivery/request-info>

⁵ Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity. Oct. 1997. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/omb/fedreg_1997standards

⁶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT. Certification Criterion. <https://www.healthit.gov/test-method/demographics>