



“ Together with Agfa HealthCare and Santeos,
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technology gap. ”

TANIA MESSING

Project Manager, SIMRAL, Alsace region, France

Share and share alike

With the SIMRAL project, Alsace e-Santé,
Agfa HealthCare and Santeos collaborate
to create opportunities for regional
image sharing in Alsace

Share and share alike

Interview with TANIA MESSING, Project Manager, SIMRAL, Alsace region, France

“This regional imaging project is very new and innovative in France: we are the first to study open sharing of patient images with private practices and with other hospitals and clinics,” begins Tania Messing. “And when you have this type of large-scale and innovative project, you will also face lots of challenges. But we are moving steadily forward: we have already piloted the first part of the project implementing the Agfa HealthCare Enterprise Imaging platform as a SaaS (software as a service) in one of the participating hospitals – and in November we will take another big step, piloting the portal and the image-exam sharing platform. It’s an exciting and busy time!”

Tania Messing is the Project Manager for SIMRAL (Service d’imagerie médicale pour la région Alsace), the first regional image sharing project in France. SIMRAL, with the active support of the Alsace Regional Health Agency (ARS Alsace), aims to enable the sharing and archiving of more than a million imaging exams each year, with visualization and management of different image formats including X-rays, MRIs, CT scans, etc. Coordinated by Alsace e-Santé, the project includes a bundle of shared, hosted medical imaging services – picture archiving and communication system (PACS), radiology information system (RIS), vendor neutral archive (VNA) and image sharing – provided by Agfa HealthCare and Santeos (Worldline), acting as a consortium. Currently 55 hospitals and private healthcare facilities in Alsace are members of SIMRAL.

PACS SaaS offers flexibility and cost control

As Tania Messing explains, the project has two primary goals: to enable regional hospitals to implement RIS and PACS services using a subscription that requires a low investment, and then to archive their digital images in a shared, centralized VNA from which they can be accessed by the SIMRAL image sharing platform.

“There are quite a few hospitals (especially public hospitals) in our region that do not have a PACS, which is an absolute necessity to participate in the sharing platform,” continues Tania Messing. “Agfa HealthCare offers them the PACS as SaaS, with a pay-per-use model. So the initial investment is lower, and payments are billed based on usage. What’s more, as we have already created an agreement framework, the hospitals don’t have to do one themselves: they can just sign up through SIMRAL. So together with Agfa HealthCare and Santeos, we are helping the hospitals to close the technology gap.”

Radiologists at healthcare enterprises and radiology practices in Alsace that are members of the SIMRAL purchasing group are eager to implement the PACS. “Certainly radiologists without PACS feel the lack. Right now, we have three hospitals that are taking part in the PACS pilot: two are just starting, but one – the Centre Hospitalier (CH) de Wissembourg – is well along in the pilot, and they are already finding that there is a big improvement in sharing images internally, with their own clinical services.”

Audits: a blueprint of imaging

To ensure a smooth implementation, Agfa HealthCare first uses its experience and knowledge to conduct a thorough audit of the hospital’s imaging environment, providing a report with findings and recommendations. Once the facility decides to go ahead with the agreed implementation, Agfa HealthCare delivers the PACS, tests the IT system, connects the relevant modalities, integrates them into the PACS and begins production. “So far, about nine audits have been completed, which have provided highly useful insights for the hospitals and imaging centers,” comments Tania Messing. “And the implementation of the PACS at pilot site CH de Wissembourg has gone smoothly: there haven’t been any major issues reported. One thing we have learned during this process is that it is very important to not only provide the hospitals with the audit report, but to meet directly with them and go over it, so they can understand the proposal.”

In fact, close and direct collaboration of this kind between the various players in the project is key to the success of a big regional imaging program. For SIMRAL, a number of workgroups and project groups have been set up, and meet regularly.

The workgroups are central to the project and its specifications. “Each has its own ‘theme’: patient consent, sharing, communication, identity monitoring, financial aspects, etc.,” explains Tania Messing. “The members come from the different hospitals and clinics in SIMRAL, and then also include experts in the field.”

Tania Messing shared some of the decisions of the workgroups: “The identity monitoring group determined that when a patient with an INS-C number (national health identity number) goes to two separate healthcare facilities, the system should automatically recognize this as the same person and put the files together. Otherwise, it has to be done manually. Even if an INS-C number can be created for only about 70% of patients, this is still a big time savings, bringing the image record together and supporting the development of a regional file. For patient consent, it was decided to have each patient give consent one time for the entire SIMRAL offer: sharing with doctors, second opinions, etc. And the consent covers all of the patient’s exams. In sharing, we decided that doctors who access images – even from their own healthcare facility – must provide a motive; this is important for traceability.”



The Agfa HealthCare portfolio for the SIMRAL project comprises the following systems:

- PACS
- RIS
- VNA
- XERO Viewer*
- Master Patient Index
- Single Sign on

Agfa HealthCare's contribution

- Agfa HealthCare, in a consortium with Santeos (Worldline) delivered an innovative solution for sharing medical images across the region, along with consolidated functions for VNA, image and data management with PACS and RIS. Using a pay-per-use model, facilities can sign up to the shared services based on their specific needs. In this way, regional professionals have access to the most up-to-date imaging technology.
- Before implementation, Agfa HealthCare carries out a thorough audit of the facility's imaging environment, and creates a dedicated report and proposal. Agfa HealthCare also provides advice and support to facilities and to the SIMRAL project based on its expertise in imaging and healthcare IT, and participates in the various project committees.

Working together on a successful project methodology

In addition to the workgroups, each month the healthcare facility undergoes a review, with the project manager from the hospital/clinic, the Agfa HealthCare and Santeos project managers and the e-Santé Alsace project manager. There is also a monthly meeting of the regional project committee, with all of the project managers from the participating establishments, to give them an overview of the progress of the project. And the regional pilot committee brings together the IT and/or finance directors to make decisions on the points raised by the regional project committee or workgroups.

Designing the methodology was very much a collaborative process, in which Agfa HealthCare and Santeos were full participants. "They have good visibility of what is necessary," comments Tania Messing. "The availability of their project managers and other team members is critical, of course. It isn't only the meetings themselves: you have to prepare for the meeting, then take part in the meeting itself, and afterwards do whatever follow-up is necessary

on what was discussed and decided." In addition, she explains, "Agfa HealthCare's expertise is very apparent for training: they give advice on how to organize training sessions, how many sessions to foresee, what information to include – it's a real added value."

Modularity meets individual hospital's needs

With the PACS pilot well established, SIMRAL is ready to move to the next stage: piloting the image archiving and sharing functions. Three SIMRAL members are preparing to take part: CH de Wissembourg (with the Agfa HealthCare PACS), the Centre Régional de Lutte contre le Cancer Paul Strauss (Paul Strauss Regional Cancer Center/CPS) and the University Hospitals of Strasbourg (HUS). Both CPS and HUS will be doing the pilot with their existing PACS systems; CPS will move all its archiving to the centralized Agfa HealthCare/Santeos VNA, while the HUS will keep its own archive system but use the central archive for the image sharing. "Members of this type of regional project need the flexibility to adopt the project in their own way; the modularity was a key benefit of the Agfa HealthCare/Santeos offer," comments Tania Messing.

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The sharing pilot will test that the portal and platform are easy to use, that they work as expected, and that the time for a user to access a file is very quick – a few seconds at most. “This pilot will also create visibility for the project in the wider community: referring physicians, patients, etc. While the PACS is very important, it is only visible within the hospital itself. We aren’t sure how long this pilot will last: probably through mid-2016. We need to have enough time to get plenty of feedback and to improve the platform. Because if we release it and it still has problems, we can lose the confidence of the users. It is better to take the time to come out with something proven and tested.”

“Good communication will be critical to the project’s overall success,” says Tania Messing. “It is in many ways as important as the technology. The referring physicians must see the added value of this system, since they won’t be receiving additional payment for using it. And the patients as well must see the benefit, and have their concerns answered.”

Access to all images, anywhere

In the end, the project will mean big, positive changes for all the stakeholders, she insists: patient care givers can see the entire patient history, even when exams are taken in different facilities, while patients will do fewer duplicate imaging exams, which can potentially reduce their exposure to imaging radiation dose: “fewer exams means less dose,” says Tania Messing. “It will also mean no more image films and CDs: the patient no longer has to store them at home and remember to bring them to appointments, the hospitals can save money and time, and the clinicians can immediately access everything they need in SIMRAL.”

Based on her experiences so far, Tania Messing has some advice for other regions embarking on this type of

ambitious project. “First of all, get your workgroups set up before you start the project, so that you have a good framework for your needs. When we started, it wasn’t always clear what was needed. So you need to know where you are going in terms of sharing, etc.: what to share, with whom, in what context, etc.”

Agfa HealthCare and Santeos: Providers offering added value

What’s more, she says you must make sure that the providers you select for the project are capable and competent: “You need providers who really understand how an imaging environment and workflow work; who understand all the software, have a good visibility of the hospital environment itself, and of course have an in-depth understanding of the PACS. They must have the knowledge necessary to understand the issues and questions: without this expertise, I fail to see how they can propose solutions that really meet those needs. You also need a technical interlocutor, who can speak about networks, etc.” According to her, Agfa HealthCare and Santeos have successfully met those requirements.

“Agfa HealthCare and Santeos together had all of the necessary competences for the different aspects of this project. From the beginning, they established a good relationship with us and the SIMRAL members; they are supportive and share their knowledge and advice. They have been very involved in all the workgroups and project groups, working with us in a true collaboration.”

While there is still a lot to do for the upcoming image sharing pilot and the project itself, the successes so far are a good indication of the future of SIMRAL, and the collaboration between Agfa HealthCare, Santeos and e-Santé Alsace to create a regional image sharing service that will offer proven value to all the stakeholders in the region.

* XERO Viewer is not available in Canada.

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