



Sesam Vitale

One of the most successful healthcare smart card projects worldwide is the French Sesame Vitale program. The program, which was started in 1978 and rolled out throughout France between late 1997 and 2001, issues citizens smart cards that are used within the country's health insurance system. When the program was initiated, the French government was the second largest healthcare spender in the world, but citizens were frustrated with the delays encountered in obtaining reimbursement. Reducing administrative costs was the key driver for the project. The government needed to change its approach and develop a more efficient and cost-effective system.

The overall objective of Sesame Vitale was to move from a paper-based healthcare benefits payment system to a system based on electronic transactions. The initial goal was to replace all paper bills with electronic care sheets that are transmitted directly by the provider to the insurer. Electronic refunds are assigned to the patient, who only pays a small portion of the bill at the time of service. The program now also enables the electronic transfer of medical records and prescriptions to healthcare agencies responsible for reimbursement. In the previous paper-based system, the French Government took up to 2 months to process claims and reimburse citizens. Today this process typically takes a few days.

The program is managed by the state-controlled social security organization (CNAM). At the onset, doctors and other private practice health professionals were required to install a computer and transmission device in their offices, many of which had no such system at the time. The doctors were then provided with the Sesame Vitale "Health Professional Card." Physicians at first saw the program as government interference in their way of doing business and were reluctant to join. The increased expense incurred by the doctors overshadowed the increases in efficiency touted by the healthcare system. Many patients also did not fully understand the potential benefits. Concerns were also expressed about the potential for invasion of privacy.

After several years, most of these objections are resolved. With the system now in place and running smoothly, information on treatment and cost is processed at the doctor's office and is immediately transmitted to the health insurer, in a completely paperless process. Over 50 million French citizens currently use their Sesame Vitale smart cards.

The network that supports the Vitale system is accessed through a national secured extranet operated by a private telecommunications company. Two smart cards are required for access, one for the patient (the Vitale card) and one for the provider (the Health Professional Card). The electronic transaction can also be transmitted via a different network, using Internet standards. For security reasons, however, data sent to the mandatory insurer must be input through the secured network. The information contained in each health professional's card varies by provider specialty, allowing providers to access only relevant portions of the patient's file. The system also allows for electronic signatures and eligibility verification.

The results of the program have been striking:

- Over 1 billion euros per year in savings



- Better control over expenditures
- Increased privacy
- Faster settlement of healthcare claims, often in just a few days

In addition, the government has been able to build up statistics on pathologies.

One of the major goals of smart identification cards was to empower citizens and also to provide a non-contestable identity document to limit fraud. By eliminating the need for an individual to verify identity—a major cost component of traditional systems—the cost of delivering services has been reduced dramatically. The use of smart cards has also increased national security and created a “feedback” loop with citizens.

This profile was developed by the Smart Card Alliance Healthcare Council for the white paper, “Smart Card Applications in the U.S. Healthcare Industry.” For more information about how smart cards are used for secure identity and other applications, please visit the Alliance web site at <http://www.smartcardalliance.org>.

