HIMSS15 -- the largest health IT educational event in the U.S. -- is just around the corner. New themes receiving special attention this year include security and the role of startups in health IT. Organizers say top federal regulators will also be at the conference addressing the newly proposed meaningful use Stage 3 guidelines.

This is a report for iHealthBeat, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. I'm Rachel Dornhelm.

This year's Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society conference kicks off in Chicago on April 12. Karen Malone, vice president of meeting services for HIMSS, says one keynote session will be especially timely, with acting CMS Administrator Andy Slavitt sharing the stage with the National Coordinator for Health IT Karen DeSalvo.

(Malone): "Between the two of them, we know there will be a lot of information that will be shared about the newly proposed regulations on meaningful use [Stage] 3."

In addition to news about the latest regulations, Malone says one of the new focuses this year is security. For the first time, officials from the FBI will address conference attendees in a session called "Protecting our Patients by Staying Ahead." Malone says there will also be a special educational exhibit.

(Malone): "Data breaches have been top of mind recently for a lot of folks. And it certainly ... has impacted the health industry, as well. Having that in mind, we deployed -- brand new this year -- a cybersecurity command center where you can actually check out your cybersecurity IQ through gamification if you will ... do a random malware attack on a virtual system at a hospital."

The College of Healthcare Information Management Executives, or CHIME, founded a security group last July. CHIME Executive Vice President for Membership and Professional Development George McCulloch says his group is sponsoring events for conference attendees to meet and share their latest experiences. One issue he's been hearing about is more so-called "phishing."
(McCulloch): "Where you get an email from an organization or person that you think is legitimate and by clicking on that, you give them your credentials and Social Security number, whatever it is, and they gain access that way, so I think the threat horizon has broadened."

Many new health IT security workers have come from other IT security fields. McCulloch says HIMSS offers a good opportunity for new entrants to learn more about the particularly sensitive nature of health records.

(McCulloch): "To say, 'Oh my goodness, I may have come from banking, I may have come from military, what I was protecting was this. Now it's something else.' So I think it's a great place to get oriented to the particular culture and technology that we have in health care."

In addition to security, another area getting a lot of attention at the conference this year will be startups, according to Malone.

(Malone): "Disruptive technology and next generation technologies are becoming such a key piece of delivering health care in the future and especially when you think about mobile devices and wearables and how [they] really engage the patient more."

This rings true to Julia Adler-Milstein, an assistant professor at the University of Michigan in the School of Information and the School of Public Health. She says of particular interest would be new entrants and products in the EHR space that are focused on team-based care, as well as population-based health.

(Adler-Milstein): "We need to make progress in those fields, so it will be interesting to see what traditional vendors, as well as what some of the startups are doing to make that happen."

Other big topics carrying over from past years include social media in health and interoperability. JoAnn Klinedinst, vice president of professional development for HIMSS, says this year the conference will have health IT professionals from the National Football League talking about how they use interoperable systems for sports medicine and player care.

(Klinedinst): "It's real important for health care to look outside of the industry to learn how others work and interact, and the fact we were able to bring the NFL to our HIMSS conference educational lineup is really, really exciting."

Organizers say that attendance is expected to be just above last years, with about 39,000 attendees.

This has been a report for iHealthBeat, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have
addressed, please email us at iHB@CHCF.org. I'm Rachel Dornhelm, thanks for listening.