

Medical records going digital

By **Lindsay Tice**, Staff Writer

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When Dr. Larry Hopperstead worked as a trauma surgeon, he often had precious little medical information about the people he was fighting to save.

Were they allergic to penicillin? Did they have a heart condition that could affect his diagnosis? Would they have a religious objection to blood transfusions?



Dr. Larry O. Hopperstead, chief medical officer at Central Maine Medical Center in Lewiston

Patients were often alone and unconscious when brought in. Hopperstead had no choice but to work without a medical history.

In Maine, that may soon be a relic of the past.

HealthInfoNet, an independent, nonprofit corporation, announced Wednesday a statewide initiative to make all medical records electronic, placing them in a common database accessible to Maine doctors and hospitals. About 2,000 doctors and 15 hospitals - including Central Maine Medical Center in Lewiston and Franklin Memorial Hospital in Farmington - will participate in a pilot version of the project.

Backers say electronic, shareable medical records will improve patient care, particularly for poor people who rely on emergency rooms for their care, and for people in rural areas, where doctors are separated by hundreds of miles and patient information is difficult to share. They also believe the database will save patients, insurance companies and others about \$50 million a year on prescriptions, hospitalizations and repetitive medical tests.

"A lot of medical care today takes place in an episodic fashion by different physicians," said Hopperstead, chief medical officer at Central Maine Medical Center and a member of HealthInfoNet's board of directors. "That kind of episodic care leads to a formidable pressure to duplicate tests already performed by another provider because they're not readily available."

Maine will be one of the first states in the country to create a medical database, according to James Harnar, project coordinator for HealthInfoNet.

A small group of Maine doctors began pushing for a medical records database about five years ago. In 2006, they formed HealthInfoNet as a public-private partnership, creating a 19-member governing board of doctors, health-care executives, patients, employers and government officials to run it. Dora Mills, the head of Maine's Center for Disease Control, is on the board, as well as Brenda Harvey, commissioner of the Maine Department of Health and Human Services.

The group raised \$4 million - largely from the Maine Health Access Foundation, the state's largest hospitals and Martin's Point Health Care - to launch a two-year-pilot project. The first year will be spent configuring and testing the database. Doctors in the pilot program will begin using it next year, with immediate access to patients' diagnoses, allergies, medication history, lab work and doctor reports.

To prevent medical records from being lost or erased, the database will be hosted at two data centers in St. Louis and will be backed up weekly. To allay security fears, records will be password-protected and shielded by both virtual security measures and physical security at the data centers.

"People think paper files are pretty secure, but it's actually much easier to gain access to them in a physical (doctor's) office," Hopperstead said.

Patients will be able to access their own records online and, ultimately, will be able to see who else has accessed their medical information. They will be able to opt out of the program, choosing whether to keep some or all of their information hidden. They can also choose to keep their medical records out of the system completely or purge them once they're in.

Medical records in paper files will not be transferred to the electronic database.

Harnar believes it will cost \$5 million to \$6 million a year to run the database after the pilot program wraps up. HealthInfoNet has not figured out how it will pay for that, but one option is to implement a subscriber fee paid by doctors and hospitals.