

Electronic health record network launched statewide

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Martin's Point joins other health-care providers in pilot project of sharing info

BRUNSWICK — Beginning today, Martin's Point Health Care and health-care providers statewide will participate in a pilot project to create an electronic health record network that will allow health-care providers to share patient information statewide.

Organizers hope it also will lead to improved and more efficient patient care.

Proponents say the new network will allow caregivers to more quickly and efficiently access key clinical information needed to provide the best care for patients, and may help reduce medical errors. Over time, the Maine Centers for Disease Control and HealthInfoNet, a statewide nonprofit organization, expect to link these two systems to allow public health officials to more quickly identify and respond to disease outbreaks, potential epidemics and bioterrorism threats.

Dr. David Howes, president of Martin's Point Health Care, said Tuesday that during his practice years in a rural island community, he frequently saw patients who had complex medical histories but had been treated in other parts of the state or country.

"There would be hundreds of pages of patient records, but all we would see were a couple of pages," Howes said. "For us to be building (the Maine HealthInfoNet) system, to put that there for the physician on the front line I think is a terrific project."

Fifteen hospitals and one-third of practicing physicians in Maine will join the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention in the 24-month pilot. Neither Mid Coast Hospital nor Parkview Adventist Medical Center will participate in the pilot study.

Following a successful completion of the pilot, plans call for HealthInfoNet to be expanded to include other providers who care for Maine's entire 1.3 million residents.

"Both hospitals have been involved at various levels in the planning process," said James Harnar, project manager of Maine HealthInfoNet, "and the idea would be that very soon after the demonstration project is complete," both Mid Coast and Parkview, as well as other practices, would be able to participate.

Martin's Point Health Care participates as an independent, multi-site primary-care practice, along with Maine's four largest health-care providers, including Maine Medical Center and Franklin Memorial Hospital, an independent rural hospital in Farmington.

Harnar said estimates indicate that half the population of Maine will participate within two years, since the participating provider organizations care for that many individuals.

Results of a feasibility study indicated that as HealthInfoNet expands across Maine, as much as \$50 million per year could be saved in health-care costs as caregivers order fewer unnecessary and duplicative tests, procedures, prescriptions and hospital admissions, according to Harnar. Maine, along with Delaware and Rhode Island, is among the first states in the country to create such a network.

Funding for the two-year pilot program came from private foundations, provider organizations and state and federal government agencies, including \$2 million from the Maine Health Access Foundation, an independent health-care foundation that promotes affordable and timely access to health care.

Another \$1.1 million was provided by, collectively, Central Maine Health Care, Eastern Maine Healthcare Systems, MaineGeneral Medical Centers and MaineHealth, the parent organization of Maine Medical Center, as well as Martin's Point Health Care.

The network only will be used for patient care purposes, Howes said, and will also be accessible to the public health officials for purposes of identifying outbreaks, beginning to work with communities to stem such public health events.

A consumer advisory group was convened to work on privacy issues, according to Harnar, and while final policies have not been developed, "it appears that our system will give individuals the opportunity not to participate if they don't want to. With the patient's consent, information can be shared electronically across organizational and geographical lines."

"This system was designed with enormous care around the privacy issue," Howes said Tuesday. "In many ways, health data is better protected in the electronic age than it was in the paper age. The levels of security we're looking at are levels you would want to have for your bank account or something of that sort."