

Patient info soon may be click away

A pilot project will connect the electronic records of many Maine doctors and 15 hospitals.

By *JOSIE HUANG, Staff Writer*

January 17, 2008

Every day, doctors refer patients to other doctors. The patients' records, however, don't always follow the patients.

That means the next doctor may end up ordering an X-ray even if one was taken just days earlier, or prescribing a drug that the patient is already taking.

"We not infrequently find people on two antidepressants, or two blood pressure-lowering drugs," said Dr. David Howes, president and chief executive officer of Martin's Point Health Care.

To protect patients from future oversights, a nonprofit that Howes is helping to lead is putting health records online so providers can make better-informed decisions.

HealthInfoNet announced Wednesday that it is rolling out a \$4 million pilot project that will connect the electronic medical records of 15 hospitals and scores of doctors' offices, from Portland to Presque Isle. The plan is to expand the system to the entire state if the two-year project is successful and finds a way to support itself without grants.

The organization plans to be one of the first to build a statewide electronic health information network when it starts collecting patients' records in the fall – with the signed consent of each patient.

By February 2009, the project's 2,000 caregivers, including one-third of the practicing physicians in Maine, will be able to start logging on.

HealthInfoNet is supposed to improve the quality of medical services while saving an estimated \$50 million a year by reducing costly hospitalizations due to medical errors and the duplication of expensive diagnostic tests and X-rays.

"To be able to look at HealthInfoNet and see that a test is there shortens the time for diagnosis, and shortens the process of care. It obviously saves money," said Howes, the vice chairman of HealthInfoNet.

The state's largest health care foundation is contributing \$3 million toward the project, with the belief that it will help people without insurance, its target population.

Wendy Wolf, president and chief executive officer of the Maine Health Access Foundation, said the uninsured receive very fragmented health care because they do not have regular caregivers, and they delay seeking help until there is a catastrophe.

"This means they will get repeated testing, and care rendered by different providers who don't have their patient information at their fingertips," Wolf said. "So HealthInfoNet is a virtual way to provide comprehensive care for everybody in Maine as we work toward universal health coverage."

Orion Health and 3M Corp. have been hired to build the HealthInfoNet system. They will set up servers in two locations in the St. Louis area that will be heavily guarded, said Devore Culver, executive director of HealthInfoNet.

Recognizing that some patients may have concerns about who is seeing their health records, Culver said they will be able to put a block on their records at any time, or opt out of the project altogether.

Culver acknowledged, "there is no one who can absolutely guarantee that nothing will ever happen" because of hackers. "All you can do is describe the risk and the benefit and let the consumer make the decision."

The participating health care systems were chosen because of their large patient bases and existing electronic medical record systems: Central Maine Healthcare in Lewiston; Maine Health, owner of Maine Medical Center in Portland; MaineGeneral Medical Centers in Augusta and Waterville; and Eastern Maine Healthcare Systems in Brewer.

The project also is represented by an independent primary care physician practice, Martin's Point, and a rural hospital, Franklin Memorial Hospital in Farmington.

The participants account for more than half of Maine's annual hospital admissions, and nearly 40 percent of Maine's outpatient visits each year, according to HealthInfoNet.

Aside from the foundation grants, HealthInfoNet is being funded through \$1.1 million...

worth of contracts with the providers. The state also contributed \$265,000.

Culver said the challenge in the coming year is to figure out a long-term plan to support HealthInfoNet. Insurers, who Culver said would benefit from the reduced health care costs, could be asked to contribute.

Culver said HealthInfoNet hopes to raise an additional \$2 million to expand the type of health information collected – the current categories include medication, lab work, allergies and hospital visits – and make it possible for patients to look at their own records from home.

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