

Networking: Cheap health-records software

August 22 2005

The federal government and commercial-software developers are offering doctors and medical clinics low-cost -- and sometimes free -- electronic medical-records software, hoping to spur the expansion of networked physicians' offices around the United States, experts told UPI's Networking.

The government's Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, a unit of the Department of Health and Human Services, is moving forward with a plan to provide VistA-Office E-Health Records application software to physicians. The software was developed for the Veterans Administration and is said to install easier than commercial off-the-shelf networking software available to doctors. It is available at a minimal cost.

VistA-Office EHR is an "important part" of the government's effort to fully computerize the nation's healthcare system within 10 years, said Barbara Boykin, chairman of the VistA Software Alliance, and Maury Pepper, chairman of WorldVistA, both of which are marketing the software for the feds.

The government is not the only entity offering cheap software to induce docs to network their offices with hospitals and other healthcare providers, however. Commercial providers also are offering their software -- sometimes for a free trial -- to attract the doctors' attention.

One company, NaviMedix in Cambridge, Mass., is helping to network doctors' offices with health insurers. The company sells its Web-transaction platform to major healthcare insurers, which in turn require

the providers they work with to use the NaviNet network to process claims.

"One of the best parts for the docs is that they get to use NaviNet for free," said Catherine Allen, a NaviMedix spokeswoman. "That is a huge hot button in the industry now -- the trend of health plans sponsoring a technology, and how it is spurring provider adoption of technology, pulling them into the PC and Internet era where they might not otherwise have gone by themselves."

The Orthopedic and Sports Medicine clinic of Erie, Pa. -- with 35,000 orthopedic patients -- is using NaviNet to connect with one of its health plans to network processes such as billing, referrals, claim investigation, eligibility and benefits verification and re-credentialing.

The clinic reported an annual increase of \$120,000 in revenue and collections for claim investigation alone, Allen said.

A survey this past spring by NaviMedix indicated 97 percent of respondents improved office efficiency through the use of networking technology, and 86 percent of providers who used networking technology significantly reduced outbound calls to health plans. Nearly 70 percent of respondents indicated that networking technology reduced the amount of paperwork in their offices.

Smaller, cutting-edge medical practices are embracing networking technologies, too. On Sept. 15, 2002, the Women's Health Alliance opened its doors and immediately began entering patients into the computer network. As a result, the practice started with no paper charts and remains this way today. Because the doctors are young -- both are in their mid-30s -- they have a younger clientele who took to an electronic office right away.

"We immediately had patients saying, 'Wow, how neat is this,'" said Dr. Anu Chakraborty, whose practice is located in the Eatonville, N.J., area.

Chakraborty said the integrated electronics medical records practice management helps offices keep on top of records, because there is no longer the question of items being missed because the software prompts the doctors' staff to complete all required fields. All of this frees up time and allows the practice's physicians to see 25-35 patients each day, two or three days a week. When the doctors are away from the office, they can use their tablet PCs to go over labs or pull up patient histories, she added.

Medical schools, however, are even further advanced than most doctors' offices in terms of networking and computer-technology use.

"Today's medical students are trained to use tablets rather than paper and pencil throughout their studies," Chakraborty said. "As a result, by the time they become attending physicians, EMRs (electronic medical records) are an intuitive part of practicing medicine for them. This will help EMRs progress from a work in progress to an integrated part of today's medical society."

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