

Networking: Digital doctors' records

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Old-fashioned medical claims processing -- doctors handwriting codes for procedures on hardcopy files -- is gradually being replaced by digital physicians networks, electronic archives that maintain all patients' medical histories, experts tell United Press International's Networking.

Last week Providence, R.I.-based Digital Physicians Network announced that it had debuted a new tool for physicians, surgeons and other healthcare providers to "transform" the process of coding case files intended to improve the accuracy of claims and streamline billing.

"It sounds pretty basic, but it can actually be fairly complex," a spokesman for Merge Healthcare, another software developer for the healthcare, field told Networking.

In the United Kingdom the government is spending \$10 billion to digitize medical records. The system goes live next month, and there will be 50 million patient records available when it is completely installed.

The project is not without controversy, however. "Money should follow patient demand," Andrew Lansley, a conservative member of Parliament and the shadow secretary of health, said in a statement to the news media. "The government has supplied more money to the NHS (National Health Service), but lost control of costs."

There is concern that the privacy of patient records can be easily compromised, as hospitals personnel other than doctors may be able to access the information and sell it on the black market.



The developers of the system believe that won't happen, however.

The network will contain records of all a patient's interactions with the healthcare system, enabling paramedics on the scene of an accident or heart attack to look up a patient's records and make sure that they are not given any medicine that will cause an allergic reaction.

Another facet of the system will enable patients to book medical appointments online, rather than in person or on the phone. They will also be able to search for medical facilities to which they can go, a flexible option that is much needed in a nation notorious for severalmonth delays for certain medical procedures.

The network also enables doctors to transmit medical records such as prescriptions to pharmacists. This may reduce prescribing errors. Already, in the early stages of the program some 50,000 individuals have received prescriptions in this way.

By contrast, the U.S. government has provided about \$200 million for medical-records-management projects. Most of the funding for networking of records at hospitals has come from the private sector here.

One interesting case study is Virtua Health, a multi-hospital healthcare system based in Marlton, N.J. The network supports four hospitals, a headquarters building, doctors' offices and remotely located outpatient centers. There are more than 3,000 computer workstations, notebook computers, tablet PCs and PDAs, all running on the Microsoft Windows operating system. About 150 Windows-based servers power the network.

A spokesman for Virtua described the network as state-of-the-art. "These hospitals will encompass complete electronic medical records and computerized patient rooms, using the Internet for information management and communication," said a spokesman.



The prognosis for digital doctors' networks has improved of late, due to federal regulations and state rules prescribing the protection of medical records, the spokesman said.

One of the emerging healthcare concerns -- when it comes to medical recordkeeping -- is language barriers. Nearly 47 million Americans -- or 18 percent of the U.S. population -- report that a language other than English is the native tongue. That leads to nearly 28,000 deaths yearly at hospitals, as emergency-room physicians and nurses cannot communicate with the sick persons, a spokesman for the Language Access Network, a project of Ohio State Medical University Medical Center, said.

The language-interpretation network connects doctors with interpreters through a centralized video call center. "The call center links to a wireless-powered mobile cart, equipped with state-of-the-art, two-way video conferencing equipment, which connects medical personnel instantly to an interpreter who sees, and can be seen, by the patient," said the spokesman for the Language Access Network. "The use of this video language interpretation technology allows for a highly interactive exchange and a better overall healthcare experience."

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