

Networking: Portals for medical care

June 26 2006

A patient refills her prescription for Diuril online, a high-blood-pressure medication, without having to walk down the street in the summer heat and wait for the local pharmacist to fill out the prescription.

Though rare today, Internet-based "patient portals," like the one at Detroit's Henry Ford Health System, which is a network of 24 primary-care centers that makes it one of America's largest healthcare systems, will become increasingly common in the future.

"Hospitals across the country are seeking a more comprehensive approach to patient portal development that encompasses clinical information," said Peter Kuhn, president of Medseek, the Solvang, Calif.-based network technology developer.

Using the ".net technology" developed by Microsoft, patient portal platforms can link directly to the electronic medical records of hospitals, enabling patients to update their information, including emergency contact numbers; obtain personalized medical information; ask billing questions; renew and refill prescriptions; request results from lab tests and receive automatic updates.

The Ford health system's portal is expected to complete more than 100,000 transactions for 45,000 registered users, Kuhn said.

Doctors and other healthcare professionals see portals like these as a key to preventative healthcare. According to the American Heart Association, preventive healthcare services are an integral part of any

corporate healthcare plan.

During the last six months there has been a national push for physicians to convert their paper records to electronic medical records (EMR) to facilitate preventive care. President Bush, during his State of the Union address, even asked Congress to "make wider use of electronic records and other health information technology to help control costs and reduce dangerous medical errors."

Doctors are being encouraged to switch to EMR by the feds -- as well as state governments, patients and insurance companies. However, the total number of physicians in private practice who have converted to EMR remain below 10 percent.

With more than 200 different EMR and practice management software vendors to choose from, doctors are faced with the challenge of having to sort through the huge number of vendors to find a product that fits their specific needs.

Private-sector deals are helping move that number up, however.

EMR Experts Inc., a provider of electronic medical record and practice management software solutions, today announced a new partnership with Bizmatics, Inc. to market electronic medical record software, PrognoCIS.

The company said the addition of PrognoCIS EMR to EMR Experts' product line will provide physicians with more options -- including linking medical records to a patient portal, a physician portal, an executive dashboard and medical-history kiosks. The software is available as both an application service provider (ASP) and in-house client-server solution.

By generating electronic records at the point of care, Prognosis brings efficiency to operations. The technology includes Internet, Intranet, wireless, voice-activation and pen-based solutions, according to Chris Ferguson, president and chief executive officer of Bizmatics, based in San Diego.

"Online health sites are not only less expensive, they are convenient," said a spokeswoman for LiveHealthier.com, an online nutrition site for consumers. "People want to be healthy and combat all of the ills that go along with poor diet and lack of exercise, but they want it to fit neatly into their schedule."

The site fills an interesting niche of the preventive-care world -- providing personal care and nutritionist services for \$20 a month. The site "provides fitness experts, nutritionists and health advice available at the tip of your fingers."

Sites like that also allow members to track their movement, nutrition, successes and challenges and then share them with co-workers, health professionals and a global community of people that share similar interests and goals. "Hiring a personal trainer and/or a nutritionist is an advantage not everyone can afford," said the spokeswoman for Livehealthier.com.

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