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## **Online patient records funded**

**By Elizabeth Lynch**

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A Fishkill-based program has received a \$100,000 grant to further the ability of Hudson Valley doctors to access and share patient information electronically.

Taconic Health Information Network and Community received the grant last week from the Foundation for eHealth Initiative, a nonprofit public policy group based in Washington.

Taconic Health was one of nine organizations and programs nationwide that shared \$2 million in funding through eHealth Initiative's federally-funded program, Connecting Communities for Better Health. Taconic is a program of the Independent Practice Association, which includes 2,300 doctors in Columbia, Greene, Sullivan, Ulster, Dutchess, Orange, Rockland and Putnam counties.

President Bush has set a goal of having a national electronic health record for all Americans within the next decade. Being able to compile all of an individual's health records will reduce the potential for errors such as drug interactions, and reduce the need to have tests done more than once.

About 1,400 physicians in the Hudson Valley use the technology to access clinical, insurance, administrative and demographic information for 600,000 patients via a secure Internet connection. Vassar Brothers Medical Center, Kingston Hospital, Benedictine Hospital, LabCorp and MVP Health Care participate. The grant money will be used to hard-wire other hospitals and health care facilities into the system, as well as adding their patients' records to the database.

"It benefits everybody," Benedictine Hospital spokesman Rob Baumstone said.

### **Sharing information**

Most doctors typically have access only to their patients' records. The objective is for doctors to be able to share records and to give patients access to those records. Hospitals provide the information and doctors are able to access records from any Internet connection.

"I believe that through the integration of systems, I can better take care of our patients by having information available not only at my office, but in my home and in the hospital," said Dr. Eugene Heslin, president of the Ulster County Medical Society and vice chairman of Kingston Hospital's board.

Heslin's practice, the Bridge Street Family Medicine in Saugerties, was one of the test sites for the program that began more than two years ago.

In the fall, the system expects to add digital signatures, which will allow doctors to sign off on records without coming to the hospital, Baumstone said.

Some 600,000 patients have some element of their medical records in the system, but they are not all together in one place, said Dr. John Blair, president and chief executive officer of Taconic Health.

"This is the first step," Blair said. "Ultimately it will lead to an electronic health record."

The grants were awarded at the Cornerstones for Electronic Healthcare Conference in Washington by the Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson.

Getting the grant means the Hudson Valley will "have the opportunity to help develop medicine as how it might be practiced in the future of the country," Heslin said.

One objective is to link medical records with prescriptions and laboratory results to prevent medical errors and reduce the number of times a patient will have to have tests redone.

While an electronic health record may be inevitable, Town of Wappinger resident Alice Wong isn't completely convinced the security issues have been resolved.

"People can be discriminated against. They can be denied insurance in the future," she said, noting that someone had used her e-mail account. "It's a little bit scary. I don't think I have enough information. They haven't given me confidence."

There are privacy concerns, but only those who currently are able to see paper copies of a health record will have access to the electronic record, Blair said. That means a dentist should not have access to a patient's mental health records, unless they were specifically given to the dentist.

"I think you can't give short-shift to the issue of confidentiality," said Bruce A. Boissonnault, president of the Niagara Health Quality Coalition. But confidentiality and electronic delivery "are not mutually exclusive."

"Thankfully, with technology and policies that have emerged, we can secure that information so that only those who are authorized to see will see it," said Janet Marchibroda, chief executive officer of the eHealth Initiative.

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