

Health Care

Your medical chart is pixelating

And that's a good thing

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You've just gone to your primary-care physician for your yearly checkup. He (or she) has recommended you to another physician for a colonoscopy, or you might be pregnant and sent to an obstetrician. Another doctor and another office with separate records is your next step. But are all your medical records from these various physicians following you around making sure your health dots are connected?

While taking care of patient's health is a doctor's number-one concern, keeping track of a patient's health history can be an overwhelming task when there are a variety of physicians and specialists involved. Wouldn't it be safer, more cost-effective and just a plain no-brainer to just have all your records a mouse click away for your doctors (and you) to see? The answer is a resounding "Yes!" says Dr. John Blair, CEO of Med Allies (www.medallies.com) and president of the 3,000-member Taconic Independent Physicians Association (www.taconicipa.com) in Fishkill.

Computer technology, networking and sharing information online was just breaking ground when Taconic IPA was formed in 1989. For the past eight years, hundreds of physicians participating in Taconic IPA have worked toward keeping track of patients' charts by compiling information electronically.

Taconic Health Information Network and Community/Regional Health Information Organization (THINC-RHIO) has been instrumental in aiding the mission to bring the Hudson Valley up to speed electronically, medically speaking. THINC-RHIO (www.thincrhio.org), established in 2005, received a \$5 million grant through New York State Department of Health's HEAL-NY (Health Efficiency Affordability Law) program in 2006. The nonprofit recently received an additional \$1.9 million in September 2007 for a "Pay for Performance" grant to improve reporting quality.

"This is part of a sustained effort to improve the quality of health care at a price all New Yorkers can afford," said Gov. Eliot Spitzer in announcing the grant. "The way we pay for health care can influence the cost and quality of care. This initiative ... will do exactly that, by working with health-care providers and insurers." Med Allies will implement the "pay for performance" grant as THINC-RHIO's technology service provider.

One example was given by Med Allies' Blair of how electronic records management can improve the quality of patient care: "A hemoglobin A1C test tells how well a diabetic is controlling their sugar. The less controlled, the higher the test results. You like to see results under 7. Now, imagine a doctor inundated with paperwork and charts trying to keep track of his diabetic patients' progress. As humans, we cannot run 24/7, but computers can. It can do all the administrative work and keep track faithfully, alert the doctor immediately to any change in blood sugar levels, and he can then alert the patient and bring them into the office and stabilize them."

The result? Better patient care, fewer medical errors leading to hospitalizations and fewer medication errors, since electronic medical-record sharing would also alert doctors to possible medication interactions. "The \$5 million from the HEAL grant went to implement 1,000 electronic health records in doctors' offices in the Hudson Valley," said Blair. "The new funding will go directly toward incentive payments. Some health plans, such as MVP, are matching the funds. We expect 300 doctors to be involved in the pilot project over the next two years. There is approximately \$10,000 for every doctor who implements EMR (electronic medical records) and can show they have improved quality of care." Eight counties participate in THINC-RHIO: Delaware, Dutchess, Orange, Putnam, Rockland, Sullivan Ulster and Westchester.

“Health plans are willing to pay extra money for preventative care,” continued Blair. “With doctors putting our EMR system in place, they are finding the computer alerts them to drug interaction problems. As a result, we have found about one in 20 prescriptions are altered in the Hudson Valley as a result of the computer catching the problems: catching a problem as simple as a rash or as serious as a stroke.” Blair also said lessons learned from the tragic events of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina only reinforced “why these EMR systems are needed.” Dr. Blair advocated not only for patients having ready access to their medical records electronically, but also for keeping a hard copy of them and for keeping records updated. “This is the patient’s personal information,” he said. “They should have access to their records and also have copies. Some don’t want it, but we believe everyone should have their own personal records. Our hope is that it will become part of the network and patients will have their own information that’s kept current.”

Crystal Run Healthcare’s Dr. Gregory Spencer (www.crystalrunhealthcare.com) has been collaborating on Blair’s project since its formation and with THINC-RHIO as a committee member since its formation. He said, “Crystal Run has had EMR since 1999, preventing information from being duplicated, that’s the goal. We are truly excited to be part of the regional health effort. Dr. Blair has been a real leader nationally.”

Spencer says record-sharing within Crystal Run’s own practice has been extremely rewarding for patients and physicians, and “because of that, it would be a wonderful thing to have it occur geographically.” Like Blair, Spencer said, “Patients should be involved. Since we’re all working off the same information, it benefits the patient the most to be on top of their health history.”