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Health Care

Seattle area hospitals join the fray in health records revolution

Doctors & Data

by [Peter Neurath](#) Contributing Writer

As the Obama administration prepares to spend billions to move the nation's hospitals and doctors from writing orders on paper to entering them on computers, the Puget Sound region appears to have a head start.

The region's hospitals are investing millions to ditch paper, integrate medical data with appointments and billing systems, and push the technology out to health providers in the community.

Organizations making strides in electronic medical record keeping include Swedish and Virginia Mason medical centers in Seattle, MultiCare in Tacoma and Overlake Hospital Medical Center in Bellevue.

Seattle-based Group Health Cooperative already touts its system in its marketing, saying it puts information at patients' fingertips that enables them to take better control of chronic conditions such as diabetes.

Harrison Medical Center, in Bremerton, is launching an electronic records system soon, said Cassie Sauer, a vice president at the Washington State Hospital Association, which does not keep comprehensive track of the technology.

The federal money will start to flow into hospitals and doctors in 2011, depending on the number of Medicare and Medicaid patients who are seen and whether, by the government's definition, the health group is making "meaningful use" of electronic records, said Dr. Tom Wood, chief medical information officer at Swedish.

Hospitals with electronic medical records, Wood said, stand to land millions of dollars, and individual physicians who are tapped in will draw \$44,000 each over a period of several years. This is the carrot the government is feeding hospitals and doctors to embrace electronic record keeping.

By 2017, though, hospitals and doctors failing to make meaningful use of electronic records will begin to face penalties from Medicare, Wood said. Year by year, Medicare will reduce the amount it pays them for treating patients.

“That’s the stick side of it,” he said.

Not everyone believes that widespread adoption of electronic medical records will generate huge savings in the nation’s health price tag. Critics have contested studies showing billions expected in annual cost savings, arguing that the evidence does not support such claims.

In any case, investment in electronic records has been slow. A recent survey published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that only 2 percent of hospitals nationally have totally implemented the change.

Another survey and analysis published last month by the PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP Health Research Institute found that many hospitals indicate that federal funding is crucial to their ability to implement the technology.

The federal funds are on the way. On Feb. 17, President Barack Obama signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, commonly called the stimulus bill, which appropriates \$19.2 billion to support adoption of electronic medical records.

The hope is that replacing paper with computers will lead to massive savings by producing better health care and greater efficiency.

Jody Albright, chief information officer at Overlake Hospital, said the stimulus legislation calls for individual physicians to have electronic records in place for Medicare and Medicaid patients by 2014, and for hospitals to make meaningful use of the technology for these patients by the year after that.

Albright said Overlake has had many electronic records components in place for several years. Last year, she said, the hospital forged a five-year plan to have an integrated system for all patients.

“We’re marching along it now,” she said.

Tacoma-based MultiCare, with four hospitals, has been implementing an electronic records system since 1998.

“The goal is to provide seamless care to our patients,” said Florence Chang, MultiCare’s chief information officer.

Personal medical data follow patients electronically wherever they go within the MultiCare system of hospitals and clinics.

In 2004, she said, MultiCare’s board decided to invest in an integrated medical records system, pulling together such disparate elements as home health, pharmacy, emergency treatment, physician order entry, documentation, clinic scheduling, billing and hospital registration.

“Everything that used to be filed in a paper record now is on our electronic records,” said Dr. Mathew Eisenberg, MultiCare’s medical director of health information

technology. That means every visit to a doctor, all X-rays, EKGs, all physician notes, all patient medications, immunizations and allergies.

MultiCare licenses an electronic medical records system produced by Epic Systems Corp., in Madison, Wis., and now is offering use of that system to local doctors, who pay a one-time setup fee and \$350 a month.

“This is a program to take electronic medical records to community physicians at a fraction of the cost it would take to start from scratch,” said MultiCare spokesman Todd Kelley.

Swedish Medical Center, which also uses the Epic system, plans to do the same thing. Last month Swedish signed up The Polyclinic, a large multispecialty physician practice in Seattle.

Swedish Chief Information Officer Janice Newell said the four-campus hospital organization has spent \$120 million during the past four years to implement a comprehensive records system at all its facilities. Before that, she said, there was “paper flying around everywhere.”

Virginia Mason Medical Center, in Seattle, has been going electronic since 2001.

“We’ve been through a series of technology deployments,” said Dr. James Bender, VM’s chief information officer. “We’ve spent tens of millions, and the investment continues.”

VM has invested in an electronic clinical data repository, a clinical messaging system, an online order-entry system and outpatient prescription medicine system, Bender said, and now it’s in the first stage of a surgery management and scheduling system.

Electronic records, he said, will mean better service and safer care.

“We’re doing it for our patients,” he said. “We know that if we can make our product defect-free for our patients, we will cut the waste out of what we’re doing and make it cost less.”

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Perliza Valbuena, a registered nurse at Swedish’s Cherry Hill Campus in Seattle, types patient information into an Epic mobile work station. Swedish is beginning to tap outside doctors and clinics into the same network.

Photo: Swedish Medical Center