

# Seattle Post-Intelligencer

## The doctor will e-mail you now: Secure connections offer access to medical records, test results

September 20, 2007



Scott Eklund / P-I

Dr. Eric Seaver examines Russell Akiyama's knee Tuesday. Seaver, a **Group Health physician**, regularly e-mails his patients. "I can provide better care to patients ... because I can now communicate with them on a weekly basis and make adjustments faster than I could if I was seeing these patients every three months in my office."

For the past year, Roy Peacock has been having an e-mail relationship with his doctor. First it was just a casual hello to get acquainted. Then, after a couple of visits to his doctor's office, Peacock, a minister at Preston Baptist Church in Preston, began receiving e-mails about his blood-test results, encouragement as he waited for other results and changes to his blood pressure medication as his diet and exercise habits lowered his numbers.

"He is very quick at responding, and it's always by the end of the same business day," Peacock said about e-mailing his Group Health physician, Dr. Eric Seaver. "It would have cost me how much to go in and see him every time?" As rising medical costs and long waits in doctors' offices concern patients, **medical systems are looking for ways to make health care more affordable and convenient**. Providing e-mail access for patients is a logical step, many say. But if it's such a no-brainer, why isn't everybody doing it? Cost and privacy concerns, for the most part, say local health care providers, many of whom are moving toward implementing e-mail access as part of a switch to electronic medical records.

Group Health has been at the front of the trend. Since 2000, Group Health has offered its patients full online access to physicians through secure and private e-mail. The online services are available at no additional charge to members and are part of the premium paid to be a part of the health plan. Patients such as Peacock can access their medical records, test results, immunization records and summaries of doctor visits. Parents can look at their children's medical records, and patients can complete a full health risk assessment to add to their medical records. As of July, more than 32,000 secure e-mails were sent per month by patients using the program and more than 63,000 prescriptions were ordered through the pharmacy per month.

Seaver, who specializes in family medicine at Group Health's Factoria Medical Center in Bellevue, said e-mail eliminates playing phone tag with patients. He had 200 e-mail interactions with patients last month, accounting for nearly half of all of his patient interactions, he said. He routinely e-mails patients with a detailed explanation of lab results, treatment recommendations and follow-up plans, he said.

"E-mail ... leaves my schedule open for patients who need acute, same-day appointments, so all of my patients get the care they need when they need it," he said. "I can provide better care to patients with chronic conditions because I can now communicate with them on a weekly basis and make adjustments faster than I could if I was seeing these patients every three months in my office."

A recent study by Group Health showed busy physicians spent more time focusing on prevention and overall health goals instead of wasting patients' time by making them come in person or call on the phone to get service, said Dr. Ted Eytan, medical director of health informatics and Web services for Group Health. "We're most concerned with benefits for patients, and they are off-the-charts satisfied," he said. "When you think about it, who wouldn't want personalized communications from their doctor/care team based on their own medical history?"

Other Seattle hospitals are also implementing e-mail and Web access for their patients. Those who visit the **University of Washington Medicine Neighborhood Clinics** can use eCare, which allows them to access their personal health information over a secure Internet connection. They can e-mail physicians, schedule or cancel appointments, request prescription refills or ask for a referral.

Dr. Keith Dipboye, a general internist at **Virginia Mason Medical Center**, predicts that eventually a third of his work will be conducted via e-mail. Though the hospital doesn't yet provide secure e-mail between physicians and patients, he believes online interaction will increase. "No one wants to come in and pay for parking and a co-pay and be seen for three minutes," he said. "Patients will be able to schedule their own appointments; it will be comparable to logging into your own bank account," he said.

With its current system, the hospital can't provide encrypted e-mail to ensure patient privacy, said Marnee Iseman, vice president of Virginia Mason, but it is offering some patients the chance to communicate with physicians through a Web site. The hospital partnered with Premera and Microsoft to conduct an 18-month pilot program, which ended in June. More than 2,000 Microsoft employees logged onto a Web site and were able to describe symptoms and ask questions and receive answers. Iseman said the goal is to offer the service to a larger number of patients in the next year.

For many medical centers, it's about investing now to save money down the road. **Swedish Medical Center** is spending between \$110 million and \$120 million to implement new software for electronic medical records and patient e-mail, said Janice Newell, chief information officer. She said the hospital spends millions of dollars on transcriptions, employees in file rooms with paper charts and duplicating medical tests. The basic system will be in place on all Swedish

campuses by next year for orders, documents, billing, registration and pharmacy. By 2009 or sooner, patients will be able to e-mail doctors, see test results, pay bills online and schedule appointments. "Most of the health care industry is moving in this direction," Newell said. "While we weren't the first, we're just as aggressive."

Some worry that fewer patient visits will translate into fewer dollars for doctors' offices. The Group Health study showed e-mail decreased phone calls and patient visits, but not enough to significantly affect the bottom line. "There is no reimbursement for phone calls, so this is more efficient for everyone," Eytan said. "We worry more about our members' ability to get needed care. **When patients are more confident in their ability to manage their health, they stay healthier, and this means being able to ask your doctor a question or get clarification easily about anything that's going on.**"

For **patients such as Peacock, that relationship and connection are key.** "It is my health and (doctors) can't force me to do anything, but they can communicate with me and make suggestions," Peacock said. "Medical insurance is costly, and this gets to the point with doctors."