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Health Care

Washington state helps patients and clinics to 'bank' health records

Doctors & Data

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Washington state has set out to see whether patients will take to storing their medical records in online depositories called health record banks, and if so, whether this will improve health care and avoid needless costs.

The state Health Care Authority recently began three pilot programs in three regions of the state; one uses the health record bank Google Health and the other two use Microsoft HealthVault.

The programs are based on organizations of doctors and hospitals in three regions: St. Joseph Hospital Foundation and The Critical Junctions Institute, in Bellingham; Inland Northwest Health Services, in Spokane; and Community Choice Healthcare Network, in Cashmere.

Inland Northwest, for instance, is a nonprofit organization comprising four major Spokane hospitals. In the pilot program, it's working with three large physician practices.

The doctors and hospitals in the pilots have invested in electronic medical records. Patients can ask these health-care providers to deposit their medical information in free accounts they create at Google Health or Microsoft's HealthVault.

In total, the pilots are funded with \$1.7 million in state grants to test the viability, value and use of personalized online health records, according to the Health Care Authority. The aim is to draw more than 18,000 patients willing to deposit medical information in accounts at Google or Microsoft.

"We're providing a new tool that will empower consumers to take an active role in their health care and make better health-care decisions," said Steve Hill, administrator of the Health Care Authority. "The consumer-managed health record bank model will change health care as we know it, and we want to keep up the momentum."

Juan Alaniz, who's managing the project for the Health Care Authority, said a major problem plaguing the health-care industry is that patient information is scattered everywhere among doctors and hospitals rather than being located centrally in one place where patients can access it and transmit it to their doctors or carry it with them to office visits. With complete information about their patients, doctors can offer better advice and avoid redoing tests and screenings that have already been done.

This will improve the quality and safety of care and reduce the risk of medical errors, Alaniz said.

Google Health and Microsoft HealthVault already have free websites explaining their services and enabling people to create health record accounts. Both tech giants aim to stand out as central players in America's multibillion-dollar health-care industry. Alaniz said HealthVault is more sophisticated but Google is easier to use.

The Health Care Authority claims Washington is the first state to expedite creation of health record bank accounts.

"We're getting patients involved, which will help ensure accuracy of their records," said Gov. Chris Gregoire, in a statement. "This helps patients become active participants in their health care, and helps improve the quality of care they receive."

Missy Krasner, product marketing manager of Google Health, said Google's and Microsoft's banks are similar. Each is independent of health insurers, doctors and hospitals, and both are considered open platforms.

"We expose our technical documentation to the public and allow other companies and experts to build services on top of our product," she said from her office in Mountain View, Calif.

Bill Reid, the director of HealthVault, in Redmond, said HealthVault "fundamentally is a platform for personal health management."

It's not only a depository where patients can store health information and share it with anyone they choose, including doctors and family members, he said. It also enables patients to link with other health tools, such as the Mayo Clinic Health Manager and Heart360, a cardiovascular wellness center sponsored by the **American Heart Association**.

"We have moved beyond simply storing data to putting it into use," Reid said.