

Local pilot project allows patients to see, update their own medical records online

By Dee Riggs

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WENATCHEE — People frustrated with a lack of access to their health records may be pleased to hear that a local nonprofit agency has received \$451,000 in grant money to set up an online database local people can individualize.

"This is exciting for us because we are launching one of the first health-record banks in the state of Washington and the country," said Jesús Hernández, executive director of the Cashmere-based Community Choice Healthcare Network.

This, he said, should solve a current problem for patients who may be seeing "three to four different providers, and their records are scattered among different clinics, so it's very hard for them to have everything in one place. They have to go to each facility and ask for their records." It can also help people who experience medical problems while out of their hometowns. "If you're in Hawaii on vacation and end up in the hospital, you can go to the Web site and get key information that can save your life," Hernández explained.

With a health record bank, patients can go to one site and find a list of their medications, immunizations, allergies, lab reports and other health data, he said. While users cannot change medical records that are written by health-care professionals, they can input, through a secure Web site, updated information and add such documents as a medical power of attorney and advanced health directives. Updated information, for example, could be medications the patient was prescribed but, unbeknown to medical professionals, are no longer taking.

Community Choice Healthcare Network is one of three agencies to be awarded grants to launch pilot projects for what are called consumer-managed health-record banks. The other agencies are in Bellingham and Spokane. The three agencies are dividing a total of \$1.76 million in state grant money. Hernández said 25 agencies applied for the grants.

Health-record banks allow patients to have their personal information securely stored in one location, using Web-based tools available from Microsoft HealthVault and Google Health, state officials said.

The pilot projects are among the first such banks in the country that allow patient control, according to officials with the Washington State Health Care Authority, an arm of the Department of Health.

"I think having three established pilots will greatly increase Washington State's chance to receive federal stimulus funds from the Obama Administration, which supports the Health Information Technology and Health Information Exchange initiatives that our health record bank pilots address," said Steve Hill, administrator of the Health Care Authority in a news release.

Thousands of Washington residents are expected to enroll in one of the three pilots in the first three months. The pilots will survey participants and provide survey data to the Health Care Authority for analysis, with a preliminary pilot evaluation summary expected to be available in July 2009.

Hernández said his network represents a group of hospitals and clinics in North Central Washington, including the Wenatchee Valley Medical Center, Central Washington Hospital, Columbia Valley Community Health, North Valley Hospital in Tonasket, Mid-Valley Hospital in Omak and Quincy Valley Medical Center. A consumer-managed health-record bank will be available to anyone living in areas served by those facilities.

Hernández said a computer interface will allow patients to choose which medical facilities they want the Community Choice computer program to upload information from. From there, certain key medical data will be available to the patient, but not the patient's entire medical record, which would be too difficult to manage.

Patients can also control who has access to the data. For example, an elderly person can give access to a son or daughter who lives in another state," Hernández said.

The patient can also block certain people from certain types of information, such as a mental health diagnosis, which could be a sensitive, personal issue, he said.

To sign up can visit: www.communitychoice.us/hrb.

Those who sign up for the free service must be interviewed one-on-one with a certified registrar to ensure security, Hernández said.

Advertised enrollment events and informational workshops will be held in the coming weeks at public locations such as senior centers, libraries and schools.

Once enrolled, he said, data will automatically begin feeding into the Community Choice program, and will be updated at regular intervals, which may be nightly or weekly. The timing is still being discussed.

Grant money will fund the first year of the program, Hernández said. Funding for successive years is undetermined but Community Choice and the participating facilities "are committed to it being an ongoing service."

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