

Health Care Goes High-Tech

Tracking patient records electronically is not just helping doctors cut costs. It's improving care.

The patients cared for by the doctors at New York Children's Health Project (NYCHP) aren't the typical patients physicians and hospitals encounter every day. That's because most of the people that come to the facility are homeless families, runaway kids, or victims of domestic violence.

Caring for this fragile and transient population means that doctors need to do things differently—and they do. The physicians at NYCHP utilize high-tech mobile medical units—otherwise known as doctors' offices on wheels—and on-site shelter clinics that enable them to keep tabs on these patients with electronic health records (EHR). When patients are referred to the nearby South Bronx Health Center for Children and Families for follow-up care, their NYCHP electronic health records can be accessed via computer, improving care and cutting down on costly—and potentially deadly—medical mistakes.

The cutting-edge care being given at the NYCHP is admirable—and the exception, not the rule. That's because the hardware and software that make it possible have yet to be implemented by most doctors and hospitals. According to the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society (HIMSS), a Chicago-based organization that focuses on the implementation of health-care IT, less than 20% of physicians nationwide have either basic or fully functional EHR for their patients.

While pharmaceutical companies spend billions of dollars on new drugs, and doctors devote countless hours perfecting the latest surgical procedures, the funding budgeted to upgrade the critical IT infrastructure of our medical system still lags behind other industries. HIMSS estimates that U.S. hospitals will spend about \$30 billion on IT investments this year, about the same amount they spent in 2007 and on par with forecasts for 2009. "Historically, health care has spent less on IT than almost all other

industries," states H. Stephen Lieber, president and CEO of HIMSS. Yet, he says, "Health IT adoption and use are necessary ingredients for health-care reform."

That message is being heard. Back in 2004, President Bush urged doctors and hospitals to move their medical records from paper to electronic form by 2014, in an effort to improve patient care and save money. And in the recent presidential debates, both Barack Obama and John McCain talked about

the need for electronic medical records as part of the solution to improve health care.

To help doctors and hospitals navigate this new terrain, companies such as Ingenix are providing software, services, and consulting expertise. Tina Brown-Stevenson, a senior vice president at Ingenix, says the shift into electronic capabilities in health care is akin to the transformation that took place in banking years ago. "In health care, IT allows us to have timely, accurate, and transportable information about patients," she says.

The sticking point for most physicians and hospitals, says Russ Keene, vice president of Ingenix's CareTracker division, is incorporating that IT information into the workflow of the patient care. "There's a certain fear of technology with many doctors," he says, "because they believe that electronic solutions are going to be time-consuming and difficult to use." Ingenix CareTracker services allow medical practices—whether they have one doctor or hundreds—to electronically enter patient information from each visit, respond to prescription refill requests, verify eligibility, book appointments, submit claims to the insurance company, and review and sign lab results—all online, quickly and securely.

"The technology is here," says Keene. "The challenge is delivering the benefits of health-care IT in a way that makes sense to all stakeholders." ●



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