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Stimulus prescription is electronic medical records for all; Southeast Missouri providers in favor of switch

Friday, March 20, 2009

By [Peg McNichol](#) ~ Southeast Missourian

By 2014, each person in the United States is supposed to have an electronic medical record, according to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The law attempts to improve the health-care system by using \$34 billion to spur more health-care professionals to use electronic medical records.

Dr. Robb Hicks, owner of Immediate HealthCare Inc. in Cape Girardeau, said he's "not a fan" of President Obama but praised the stimulus plan's financial incentives for converting records. Still, he and other medical professionals said the lack of EMR standards presents a big hurdle in the federal five-year goal.

When Hicks opened a Perryville, Mo., office one year ago this week, he required electronic medical records. Now, he's converting paper records at his 14-year-old Cape Girardeau practice.

"It's the future," he said.

The federal incentive will increase Medicare and Medicaid payments to those with electronic medical records starting in 2011 and continuing for five years, while decreasing payments to those still using paper records. The federal incentive payments are linked to what the stimulus plan calls "meaningful use" of electronic medical records, a term not yet fully defined by the government.

Hicks said electronic medical records improve the quality of patient care, saving time and money, reducing errors, allowing valuable cross-checks on medications and reducing insurance payment times because errors on bills are spotted more quickly.

His reasons were echoed by other health professionals in Cape Girardeau County.

Laurie Davis, business manager for the Brain and NeuroSpine Clinic of Missouri in the Southeast Medical Plaza Suite, worked hundreds of hours with a team of 10 to help her office make the switch Nov. 4.



ELIZABETH DODD ~
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Sarah Burford,
receptionist at Immediate
HealthCare in Cape
Girardeau puts away a
chart in medical records
dating back to 2004.
According to
administrator Pat Hicks,
Immediate HealthCare is
making the transition to
electronic medical
records.
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"We took every paper process and changed it, from check-in to the doctor-patient interaction to check-out and billing. Everything had to be rethought and reworked to a paperless process," she said. "We scanned in everyone's charts and had to make sure those were 100 percent completely accurate."

Though the preparation was painful, the transition was not, she said, and today "we are as paperless as possible, able to electronically grab lab results and issue prescriptions."

Davis said she remains concerned about privacy and the opposing requirements of access and security. She said her office still accepts paper records but looks forward to the day when all medical records are electronic.

Jay McGuire, Southeast Missouri Hospital information systems director, said electronic records reduce preventable medical errors. Over the last 20 years, he's seen the hospital's technology move from one server connected with 30 computers to a network of more than 75 servers, nearly 2,000 desktop or laptop computers. Today, 80 percent of a patient's medical record is electronic, he said, containing doctor's notes, lab results and digital images, among other information.

He's unsure of how the stimulus plan incentive payments will work because "the government has not defined how they will grade on 'meaningful use,' so there's a 'gotcha' there," he said.

McGuire and Diane Gammon, director of information systems at Saint Francis Medical Center, agreed that the biggest challenge to using electronic medical records is the lack of standards for a record itself. Right now, either hospital could conceivably put all of a patient's record on a portable computer drive the size of a thumb -- but a doctor's office or lab computer may not be able to access the information because so many different software products are being used.

"There is also a lot of work to change the culture of health-care providers who want to be able to offer the human touch, which computers often appear to take away," Gammon said.

Dr. R. Daniel Bieser, of the three-physician family practice Mount Auburn Medical Group in Cape Girardeau, said electronic medical records that can be accessed through private online networks help reduce some fraud.

"Every now and then a patient taking a controlled substance will call and ask for a refill and when you check, you can see they just got a refill a few days ago," he said.

Bieser's office converted all its files three years ago, eliminating the cost of retrieving a paper medical chart by replacing it with a click of a computer key.

He said investing in a computer system and software to hold patient records, insurance and billing information reduced the amount of outstanding insurance payments to 5 percent of what it was three years ago and the wait time for payments from more than three months to a few weeks or less. His practice spent about \$100,000 to make the switch. In the first year, overhead costs dropped by \$80,000, he said.

"No medical record is perfect," Bieser said, but he won't resume using the paper medical chart.

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Having the corrupt U.S. government members able to make decisions for me based on my computerized medical records terrifies me.

Just can't wait till someone hacks my medical records (be it at the doctor / hospital / government) and puts them out there for everyone to see.

-- Posted by **bebo** on Fri, Mar 20, 2009, at 7:16 AM

Computers crash daily. A person's entire medical history can be gone in a second.

-- Posted by **frazzled63701** on Fri, Mar 20, 2009, at 8:02 AM



What happens if we have some terable disaster which causes a big power outage and lots of injuries? How are they going to get their records then?

-- Posted by **newman90** on Fri, Mar 20, 2009, at 8:52 AM

From your article is sounds like a lot of people are very unsure how this will work.. Typical Obama though.. say some "great" plan and give no details to it.. Don't worry Obama lovers we will soon have everything government run....

-- Posted by **calls_it_like_he_sees_it** on Fri, Mar 20, 2009, at 12:31 PM



Ok, not sure what the big deal is. Other hospitals, including VA hospitals, in other states have been 'paper' free for over 25 years. And there are back ups of back ups when it comes to the information being stored paperless. And the back ups are not being held at the facility, but an offsite facility just in case the system at the hospital fails or there is a natural disaster that takes out the hospital.

And in the case of an emergency with hundred of injured, would you want them to wait to get the paper records before treating you???

Oh, and since paper free medical records has been being used for over 25 years at alot of hospitals, I doubt very seriously President Obama has anything to do with it.

-- Posted by **Pups** on Fri, Mar 20, 2009, at 4:45 PM

When the computer deletes my records no one will ever know I had gonorrhea.....sweet!



-- Posted by **FrankLeeSpeaking** on Fri, Mar 20, 2009, at 8:18 PM

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