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Delaware to build statewide clinical data-sharing network

By Neil Versel / Jul 10, 2003

Physicians in Delaware soon will be able to share patient records with other clinicians across the state as part of what is being touted as the first statewide point-of-care clinical data network.

Physicians will not need to have electronic medical records systems in place in order to use the new Delaware Health Information Network.

“All they really need is a Web browser. That really knocks out one of the barriers to physicians using this system,” says Michael Katz, M.D., a Wilmington, Del., anesthesiologist who directs the MSDHub physician Web portal for the Medical Society of Delaware.

MSDHub and the medical society are helping to promote physician usage of the data-sharing network.

DHIN organizers say the network will help prevent medical errors, improve public health surveillance and reduce overall healthcare costs once implementation begins around the beginning of 2004. They also say the system will contain safeguards against breaches of patient confidentiality.

Before any medical records are sent over the network, DHIN is requiring written permission of each patient, physician and the facility that owns the data, according to Johnny Walker, CEO of the Patient Safety Institute, a Plano, Texas, organization that is building the Delaware system. Users also will be required to sign HIPAA business associate agreements with PSI, he says.

DHIN essentially will be an electronic routing system rather than a centralized data storage point.

“We don’t have a database. A database causes all kinds of concerns about patient privacy,” Walker says. “All we do is create a big switch.”

He also says that PSI, as a matter of principle, will not sell data to outside interests.

PSI, a not-for-profit organization sponsored by healthcare IT research firm First Consulting Group and a number of technology and telecommunications companies, is working under an agreement with the Delaware Division of Public Health and the Delaware Health Care Commission, an independent, state-run board that promotes affordable, quality healthcare throughout the state.

Walker says that PSI soon will announce similar projects in other states.

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"We were formed to do national connectivity of communities," he says.

Walker says that PSI is looking for health insurers to fund the project once the Delaware system is up and running in about six months because the payer community stands to reap the greatest financial benefits in the form of reduced utilization and costs.

"We are working with payers now to create demonstration models to quantify the savings," Walker says.

U.S. Sen. Tom Carper (D-Del.) says in a written statement that he has asked the General Accounting Office to produce an independent analysis of the financial benefits of national implementation of PSI networks. Carper notes that one private-sector estimate pegs potential annual savings at \$40 billion.

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