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Citywide record system to keep tabs on patients

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Jeff Brenner, a family physician at Cooper University Hospital, can't count how many times patients have come to his office with a vague story about a recent trip to a specialist or the emergency room.

Some don't remember where they were treated or why, perhaps because they have mental issues or a language barrier, he said.

"I play 20 questions," Brenner said. "It's just a mess. You end up duplicating tests, you end up missing things."

Or, he holds off on treatment altogether as his office attempts to collect all the pieces of the patient's record. That can take up to a week for those with chronic illnesses who have lots of complex records at various institutions throughout the city, he said.

"It's a major time waste," he said.

Soon, Brenner won't have to worry about tracking down paper trails.

Today, the Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers, a consortium Brenner founded eight years ago, will hold a news conference at Fairview Community Center to unveil its latest project: a citywide electronic health records network.



FAYE MURMAN/Courier-Post

Nurse Practitioner Patrick Ervilus examines the electronic medical history of a patient at his office in the Cramer Hill section of Camden on September 21, 2009.

With permission from their patients, local health providers will be able to log on to a password-protected Web site and instantly look up their labs, radiology reports and hospital discharge summaries.

While Quest, LabCorp and the city's three major health care systems -- Cooper, Virtua and Our Lady of Lourdes -- have been using electronic records in recent years, this is the first time their databases will be connected.

Not only will this save time and money, Brenner said, but doctors will be able to provide more effective treatment because they will have immediate access to patients' up-to-date medical history.

Using about \$380,000 of a Merck Company Foundation grant, the Coalition will hire Phoenix-based Noteworthy Medical Systems to create and operate the "health information exchange." Though the three-year contract is

still being finalized, Brenner said he expects the system to be up and running by spring.

Noteworthy has installed health information exchanges in more than 20 communities around the country since 2001, according to CEO Paul Ruffin.

In New Jersey, a handful of hospitals -- including AtlantiCare Regional Medical Center in South Jersey -- have already begun exchanging electronic health records with doctors. Camden will be the first city to connect multiple hospitals that aren't affiliated, Brenner said.

That's no small feat for three institutions that routinely sue each other, Brenner said. Even though medical records belong to the patient, Brenner said, hospitals often view them as business data because it's not in their financial interests to share the work done at their institution with competitors.

But Camden, an impoverished urban center filled with minorities who face multiple barriers to getting health care, is one place where hospitals can agree to cooperate, Brenner said.

According to his research, an average of 35,500 residents, or roughly half of the city's population, visited the hospital at least once a year during a recent six-year period. By contrast, that figure is 25 to 30 percent nationally. Some of the most frequent emergency room users are uninsured and rely on the hospital for primary care or even a place to stay because they know it's the one institution that legally can't turn them away, he said.



Faye Murman/Courier-Post

Nurse Practitioner Patrick Ervilus uses an electronic medical history system while meeting with patient Edwin Vicente, 47, at his office in the Cramer Hill section of Camden on September 21, 2009.

"This is one of those areas where competition doesn't have a place," said Jim Dwyer, executive vice president and chief medical officer for Virtua. "You really have to come together . . . based on your commitment to take care of people."

Having access to a comprehensive electronic records system will be invaluable to emergency room doctors who are treating patients they've never seen before, especially if those patients are unconscious and can't communicate, said Joe Carr, chief information officer for the New Jersey Hospital Association. Emergency room doctors will be able to see the patient's medical history and allergies, which will help them provide safer, more effective treatment, Carr said. Patients could also save time on paperwork.

"You can go anywhere in the world with an ATM card and they know exactly who you are," Carr said. "But go across the street to a hospital and you have to fill out 20 pages of information."

Primary care doctors will also be able to keep tabs on their patients from anywhere in the world as long as they have a secure Internet connection. The system even sends them an instant notification when one of their patients' records is accessed by an emergency room doctor.

That means Cramer Hill nurse practitioner Patrick Ervilus wouldn't have had to wait until Monday to find out that patient Edwin Vicente had been admitted to Our Lady of Lourdes with abdominal pain the week before. And the doctors there wouldn't have had to go through a litany of questions to find out that Vicente, a 47-year-old North Camden resident, has a pacemaker, four bullet wounds from a previous injury, congestive heart failure and asthma, and recently had surgery for a hernia.

Ervilus scanned the reports Vicente handed him. These, too, will automatically load into the electronic system his office already uses once the citywide network gets going.

“His record would follow him wherever he goes,” Ervilus explained. “Wherever I am, I usually have my laptop with me, so I can just at a glance know exactly what’s going on with the patient.”

The health exchange will be set up so that only the primary care doctor listed on a patient’s record will be able to access his files, with an exception for emergency room doctors. With the patient’s approval, the doctor could authorize other specialists to access all or parts of the record by sending an electronic referral.

It may not seem like it, but electronic records are actually more secure than paper because the software can track exactly who accesses them, said Bill O’Byrne, state coordinator for the N.J. Office of Electronic Health Information Technology Development.

Doctors caught snooping face federal investigation and could potentially get fired, O’Byrne said.

Though the Camden exchange will start out as a three-year pilot, Brenner said he believed it would be easy to keep it going thanks to growing national interest in the concept. The federal government has set aside \$1 billion in stimulus grants to bolster electronic health exchanges. Guidelines to apply were released last month and funding should be available sometime next year.

Ultimately, regional systems like Camden’s will be plugged into a state network that could even be accessed elsewhere in the country.

With additional federal funding, Brenner said, the Camden network could be expanded to cover anyone treated in the city or county rather than just city residents. New features could be added allowing patients to log on at home to see their records, set up appointments or even e-mail doctors with questions. It could even be connected to insurance providers and pharmacies so that doctors could instantly refill prescriptions online.

“This is cutting-edge stuff,” Brenner said.

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