



THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

GLOBE EDITORIAL

The Boston Globe

## Better data for better health

July 3, 2008

BLUE CROSS Blue Shield of Massachusetts announced an agreement recently to give members access to their records via the new Google Health service. This venture is part of a movement to put consumers in charge of their medical records as the healthcare system edges into the Internet era. It's unclear, however, whether patients want this control. What's more important is getting doctors and hospitals connected into a single system. Blue Cross is doing its part by financing an experiment in three Massachusetts communities.

Google Health, like similar services from Microsoft and other companies, is voluntary. Patients will be able to store and check their records for accuracy, and if they move to another doctor, allow access via Google. Google and the other companies have agreed to privacy guidelines, but they are not covered by the federal law that protects health records held by physicians, hospitals or insurance companies. Patients should be wary of this legal void.

The private companies are taking the lead on electronic health records because of the failure of many US healthcare providers to embrace the Internet. A system should be in place that, subject to patient approval, would speed records from physicians' offices to hospitals or anyplace a person needs care.

Healthcare providers would know which drugs a patient is taking and what tests have been done. Guided by Internet-based information services, physicians would offer treatment that reflects the latest medical knowledge. All this could be done without compromising patient privacy. Data-sharing among doctors and hospitals is protected by federal law and, in Massachusetts, state privacy requirements.

Partners HealthCare and a few other regional providers have connected their hospitals with allied physician groups. These networks are isolated and small compared with the need. A recent study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that only 4 percent of US physicians are linked to a comprehensive system.

In Massachusetts, the most impressive program is the eHealth Collaborative, which has established pilot programs in North Adams and Newburyport, and is just starting one in Brockton. Blue Cross Blue Shield, with a \$50 million, four-year contribution, is the prime source of support.

In Newburyport, 100 physicians, with 100,000 patients, are hooked into a network with the Anna Jacques Hospital. In North Adams, 55 physicians and 40,000 patients are connected to the North Adams Regional Hospital. Patients must agree in advance that records are shared. The collaborative won't be able to assess the impact for a year or two, but if computerization in other sectors of the economy is a guide, the system will improve the quality, safety, and affordability of care.

The Blue Cross grant runs out on December 31, when there will still be much work to be done in the three communities. The state budget agreement reached this week includes \$25 million to advance the creation of these systems. The budget doesn't specify who should get the money, but based on its success so far, the eHealth Collaborative deserves state support to identify other communities that would be willing to implement a health records system.

The \$25 million won't buy much software or many computers. It will lay the foundation for a more expensive program requiring a combination of public and private funds.

Patients in Newburyport and North Adams will be able to access their own electronic records by the end of the summer. Then they can send them on to Google Health or another Internet service if they like. Closer to home, physicians and hospitals will already have the information they need to give them quality care. ■

© [Copyright](#) 2008 The New York Times Company