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Thursday, August 23, 2007

## Health records access may ease

Louisville studies electronic retrieval

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Mark Birdwhistell was on a flight from New Orleans to Cincinnati when an 87-year-old man became seriously ill. When the plane landed, a medical crew took the man away.

He was headed for a strange hospital in a strange city, and "all he knew was that he took nine pills a day," recalled Birdwhistell, secretary of the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services.

Wouldn't it have been nice, Birdwhistell said, if the man could have scanned his Medicare card and gained access to his electronic medical record so doctors could know what those nine pills were?

"That's where we're headed," Birdwhistell said in Louisville yesterday. "We have to move from a paper-based system to one that is electronically based."

He spoke at a news conference about a proposed electronic health-records network for the metro area.

The voluntary network is being planned by the nonprofit Louisville Health Information Exchange, or LouHIE, a collaboration among health-care providers, insurers, employers, government agencies and the University of Louisville.

LouHIE launched an online survey yesterday to gauge community support for the project, which is expected to cost \$6 million to \$9 million a year.

Storing patients' health records so emergency-room doctors and other health-care providers can retrieve them quickly would reduce medical errors and health-care costs, advocates say. It could alert doctors to drug allergies or head off unnecessary tests.

"It is extremely difficult to provide appropriate care when we're not sure that we have information that we can fully rely on," said Maureen Keenan, executive director of the Kentucky Nurses Association, a member of LouHIE.

LouHIE hopes that all or most of the roughly 1 million people in the Louisville area, including Southern Indiana, will take part in the network. The more people who are enrolled, the less it will cost per person.

If 500,000 people are included, the cost could be \$2 a month or less per person. That might be covered by employers, included in health-insurance premiums or paid by individuals.

Patients could control what medical information could be released about them, and to which providers.

They could use their cell phone to access their medical records or authorize a doctor to view them, said Judah Thornewill, acting executive director of LouHIE.

To keep records private, the network would use "the best, most robust security technologies that are available," Thornewill said. "It will be the same kinds of methods that are used to protect military secrets."

The system will include people without health insurance or means to pay, said Dr. Adewale Troutman, director of the Metro Department of Public Health and Wellness.

How many people would enroll in the network is one thing the survey hopes to find out. Another is how much money individuals, employers and other groups would be willing to pay.

Cherlyn Hall of Louisville said the service would be "fantastic."

She said her 82-year-old mother, a frequent patient at Jewish Hospital, takes 25 or more medications -- and is asked to list them at each visit.

"It would be so much easier if that would be accessible ... rather than having to rely on family to have all that information," Hall said.

Hall, a heart patient, said it would be comforting to know that if she became ill while traveling, her records would be readily available.

LouHIE will conduct its Greater Louisville e-Health Survey through Sept. 30. Results will be made public in November.

Separate versions of the online survey have been prepared for doctors, health insurers, employers and other groups, but there is also a survey form for consumers. Planners also will do telephone research and hold focus groups.

"What makes the survey unique is the extent they're (asking) the consumer what they're looking for," said Bill Lynch, regional sales director of Axolotl Corp., a clinical information company whose clients include health-information exchanges in several cities.

Filling out a survey takes about five minutes. To participate, go to [www.louhie.org/research07](http://www.louhie.org/research07).

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