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Article published Apr 24, 2011

Pilot project puts patient records online

By Judy Benson Day Staff Writer

New London - Suppose a patient who goes to the Community Health Center for routine primary care ends up one night at the Lawrence & Memorial Hospital emergency room with chest pains.

The hospital doctor orders an EKG and other tests, and taps into his computer to check the center's records for the patient's medication list and his regular doctor's most recent report. After determining there's no crisis, the L&M doctor prescribes a new medication, sends the patient home with instructions to see his primary care doctor, and even secures an appointment for him for the next day by logging into the center's online scheduling system. The next morning at the center, the man's doctor taps into his computer to access the report from the emergency room visit to begin follow-up care.

Just a month ago, that sort of seamless back-and-forth information exchange via computer would have been impossible. Getting reports between the center and the hospital would have been much slower if it happened at all, involving phone calls and fax machines because of different electronic medical records systems that couldn't talk to each other.

But thanks to a pilot project involving L&M and the health center, which treats about 11,000 patients per year at its Shaw's Cove offices, easy, online information sharing is now possible.

"This is bringing down the final barrier to really having an electronic medical records system," said Dr. Daren Anderson, vice president and chief quality officer for all 11 Community Health Centers around the state. The pilot project involves only the New London center. He noted that the centers have had an internal electronic medical records system since 2006, but it was limited in what it could share with hospitals, specialists and other medical offices.

Kim Kalajainen, vice president and chief information officer at L&M, said the hospital volunteered to be part of the state-run pilot project with the health center.

"We end up seeing a lot of the same patients," she said. In addition, the hospital saw the pilot as a way to further its own implementation of an electronic medical record system, she said.

The pilot project also involves Hartford Hospital, St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center in Hartford and Staywell Health Center in Waterbury. It is being run by eHealthConnecticut Inc., a nonprofit set up by the state in 2006 to advance the establishment of a fully electronic medical records system statewide. The pilot is a means of demonstrating the workability of what could become a statewide system, and having such a system prepares the state for a future phase of implementation of the federal Affordable Care Act passed

last year, according to a news release from eHealthConnecticut.

Kalajainen said the system is available through a website, so it is relatively low cost, and that patients have to give permission beforehand to let their information be shared. One hindrance to seeing the full benefits of the system, she said, has been that some patients are reluctant to allow access, perhaps not understanding how it could improve their care.

"We haven't had as many patients opting in," she said. "We probably need to do more public awareness education."

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