

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

DOW JONES

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WEDNESDAY, JUNE 27, 2007 - VOL. CCXLIX NO. 149

★★★★ \$1.00

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Industry Pushes E-Prescribing

By DINAH WISENBERG BRIN

The widespread use of electronic systems to send prescriptions from doctors to pharmacies promises to prevent thousands of life-threatening medical errors, save billions of dollars in health-care costs and even drive more business to drug stores.

Most U.S. physicians, however, have yet to adopt electronic prescribing, or e-prescribing, for the estimated four billion prescriptions they write annually, a situation that a phalanx of corporations and the government are working to change.

E-prescriptions, at only a couple of million a month today, "are on the verge of an explosion," Walgreen Co. Chairman David Bernauer told the National Association of Chain Drug Stores in April.

With e-prescribing, physicians can use hand-held, desktop computers or smart phones to send patient drug prescriptions to pharmacy computers.

Beyond conveying prescrip-

tions, systems can alert doctors to potential drug interactions or dosing problems, reduce handwriting errors, automate the renewal process, and provide data on a patient's drug plan. Hospitals, insurers, and technology companies, among others, have been working to advance adoption of e-prescribing.

The drugstore industry formed an organization, SureScripts, in 2001 to develop a network that allows doctors to electronically transmit prescriptions to almost all U.S. pharmacies. More than 120 physician and pharmacy software companies are certified or nearly certified to send or receive prescriptions over the SureScripts exchange.

Early this year, one of those companies, clinical software maker Allscripts Inc., joined computer maker Dell Inc. to form a coalition—the National ePrescribing Patient Safety Initiative—in an effort to provide free Allscripts Web-based e-prescribing technology to ev-

ery physician in the U.S. The coalition targets doctors in small group practices, aiming to address concerns about costs and difficulty, among other barriers to their adoption of e-prescribing technology.

Allscripts Chief Executive Glen Tullman said the coalition's effort so far has added thousands of physicians nationwide to the ranks of e-prescribers. He expects "a very strong, very high-visibility" ramping up in September, with large employers and more managed-care companies and payers joining the coalition.

Insurer WellPoint uses e-prescribing as a component of its multimillion-dollar health information-technology efforts, said Charles Kennedy, WellPoint vice president for health IT.

WellPoint sees e-prescribing as a way to lower costs and improve safety and quality of care, Mr. Kennedy said. The company is seeing very rapid growth in the transactions, although e-prescribing, in its early stages, remains "a drop in the bucket," he said.