

Free e-prescription software initiative launches

Government Health IT

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BY Bob Brewin

A coalition of nine technology companies, three major insurers and 12 health care provider organizations launched a five-year, \$100 million project today to provide e-prescribing software to every physician in the United States.

Free e-prescribing software provided by the National ePrescribing Patient Safety Initiative (NEPSI) should help drive doctors' adoption of the technology, said Nancy Dickey, president of the Health Science Center and vice chancellor for health affairs at the Texas A&M University System. About one-fifth of doctors in the country currently use e-prescribing software, she said.

Rick Spurr, chief executive officer of ZixCorp, said NEPSI followed the path blazed by his company, which provides its PocketScript e-prescribing software to doctors at no charge. Insurance companies pick up the cost. The company also provides free Wi-Fi installations in physicians' offices so they can move from one patient examination room to another with PocketScript loaded on a handheld computer or a personal digital assistant, Spurr added.

Dickey, former president of the American Medical Association, said the NEPSI project could help improve patient safety by reducing medication errors, which illegible or confusing handwritten prescriptions often cause.

The Institute of Medicine estimated in a July 2006 report that about 800,000 adverse drug reactions occur annually at U.S. long-term health care facilities at a cost to hospitals of \$3.5 billion a year. That report recommends that all prescribers and pharmacies use e-prescriptions by 2010.

Newt Gingrich, founder of the Center for Health Transformation and former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, said at a NEPSI press conference today at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., that he agreed with Dickey and the institute's report that e-prescribing can help reduce medication errors.

"Paper kills," Gingrich said, adding that the availability of free e-prescribing means there should be no excuse for doctors not to use the technology. He urged consumers to push their clinicians to sign up for the software.

Glen Tullman, CEO of health care information technology vendor Allscripts, said the free NEPSI software is based on his company's eRx NOW, Web-based software already used by 20,000 doctors to write millions of prescriptions a year. Physicians can download the software from the NEPSI Web site and have it up and running in minutes.

E-prescribing software was designed to work with a variety of physicians' information systems, Tullman said. The NEPSI software can work on any Web-enabled device, including PCs, handheld computers and cell phones, an Allscripts spokesman said.

E-prescriptions sent using the software will be transmitted to pharmacies by SureScripts, another coalition partner, which has more than 90 percent of the 55,000 pharmacies in the country on its

Pharmacy Health Information Exchange. The exchange links doctors with independent and chain drug stores.

All e-prescriptions will be instantly checked for potentially harmful interactions using a real-time

medication database provided by Wolters Kluwer Health, NEPSI said. This database will also be linked to insurance company formularies.

Google has developed a custom search engine for medical professionals that enables those using eRx NOW to get search results tailored for the medical community, NEPSI said.

Bill Montgomery, national director for health care at Sprint Nextel, said the company would support NEPSI by providing 1,000 free Pocket PCs to doctors and giving 15 a percent discount on the cost of their wireless service.

Tullman said at the press conference that Allscripts is helping fund NEPSI because he believes e-prescribing will help drive adoption of the company's core electronic health record products. The initiative said its insurance partners, Aetna, Wellpoint, and Horizon Blue Cross and Blue Shield of New Jersey will provide a range of incentives to encourage doctors to adopt the e-prescribing system, but he did not provide further details.

Spurr said the insurance company partners provide doctors with pay-for-performance incentives to doctors, with visible bottom-line results. The Tufts Health Plan in Boston saves 3 percent to 3.5 percent per e-prescription. The system uses a formulary that defaults to lower-cost preferred or generic drugs, Spurr said.

Tufts is a partner with ZixCorp and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts in the eRx Collaborative established in 2003. The collaborative handled 2.6 million e-prescriptions in 2005 and more than 2.2 million in the first half of 2006.

Spurr said ZixCorp has a more "high touch" approach with doctors than NEPSI. ZixCorp helps install the software and Wi-Fi gear in doctors' offices and provides seven-day-a-week support. As part of its partnership with Aetna, ZixCorp supports 1,000 Aetna doctors in New Jersey and another 750 in New York, he added.

Zix also has e-prescribing partnerships with Independence Blue Cross in Philadelphia, and Blue Cross/Blue Shield plans in Louisiana and North Carolina, and a deal with LA Care, the public health provider in Los Angeles.

Scott Wallace, CEO of the National Alliance for Health IT, said the NEPSI project has a real chance to succeed because it is a comprehensive solution that does not require doctors to plug in individual applications, and "there are no government strings attached."

The presence of name-brand vendors in the project should also ensure that sensitive medical information is kept private and secure, Wallace added.

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