

Sunday, September 18, 2005

## Health records going electronic

### Valley a leader in data updates

By Craig Wolf  
*Poughkeepsie Journal*



**Lee Ferris/Poughkeepsie Journal**

Lori Jesman of MedAllies goes over new features of Taconic Health Information Network and Community's computer information service with Dr. Thomas Robinson in Poughkeepsie.

Technology is transforming the old manila folder methods of medical paperwork into a new digital electronic future.

You may not have noticed yet, but it will not be long before most people do. The Hudson Valley is ahead of the curve, according to the Washington-based eHealth Initiative Foundation. Some electronic sharing of medical data is going on now, and many doctors are in training.

The expected outcome is fewer mistakes and deaths that result from them. A better quality of care, and even some cost savings in the long run, are also predicted.

"We can treat people better," said Dr. A. John Blair III. He heads the Taconic Health Information Network and Community, or THINC, which involves more than 500 physicians and more than 600,000 patients in eight counties from Ulster and Greene down to Rockland and Westchester.

About 4 1/2 years ago, the local movement toward electronic records was begun by Taconic Independent Practice Association, a group with 2,300 physician members. Blair is also president and CEO of that group, based in Fishkill.

#### Methods of saving time

One believer is Dr. Thomas Robinson, whose family practice is based in Poughkeepsie. He was an early adopter of Taconic's new electronic system, and even of other gizmos, including a handheld electronic tablet for prescribing medications.

"It takes me literally 10 seconds to write four prescriptions," Robinson said.

Saving time is one plus, but saving lives is the ultimate gain.

"The benefits are going to be getting information in one place," Robinson said. "Care is more complex now," and so is the data it generates, with more specialists, tests and procedures available.

"For us to gather it up and have it on the charts is difficult at times," Robinson said.

A national survey of the progress of 109 such efforts around the country recently found that Taconic's initiative was among the top dozen groups. These are "fully operational" networks that cover a broad range of healthcare providers, such as hospitals, insurers, pharmacies and physicians.

Ericka Salews, Taconic's project coordinator, said they've been told by federal officials that Taconic was one of the top three, though there is no formal ranking.

Wednesday in Washington, Janet Marchibroda, CEO of eHealth Initiative, spoke at a Capitol Hill briefing on how the electronic medical records work is going nationally. Congress has funded some development work.

"It's been very positive," Marchibroda said of the federal reaction. "We've seen eight bills in Congress over the last couple of months," and strong leadership from the Bush administration, she said.

### **'Great pioneer' in area**

Blair's achievements with Taconic were praised by Marchibroda as "great work."

"He's really been a great pioneer in this area compared to other efforts," she said. New York state's progress also "shows real leadership," she said.

The local project, which creates a network between participating doctors, hospitals, insurers, laboratories and others, is designed to keep going even after federal funding stops, an aspect that Marchibroda said was not only important but proving hard to achieve nationally.

"Developing a sustainable business mode for health information exchange is one of the thorniest efforts," she said.

The up-front costs of going electronic are considerable, including the time it takes to train everyone. Robinson said it can cost \$10,000 or more per staff member to get set up.

Such investments could save a lot in the long run. A recent study by the Center for Information Technology Leadership, a national group, found net savings from the national implementation of fully standardized interoperability between providers and other organizations could result in annual savings of \$77.8 billion, or about 5 percent of the total \$1.7 trillion spent on healthcare in 2003.

Shifting into the e-era is easier at huge institutions in metropolitan areas, but more challenging in spread-out regions like the Hudson Valley, Blair said.

"This initiative in the Hudson Valley really is working to help bring the small physician practice into the fold on this," he said.

### **Training offered**

Another element of the local system is MedAllies, a business that was set up to help provide services to make the electronic interchange work and teach people how to use it.

Lori Jesman, a MedAllies trainer, travels to each office giving physicians and staffers an orientation to the new systems and doing troubleshooting when they get stumped.

"People are very accepting," she said. "People want to learn the system because it's certainly an advantage to them."

There's a front-end learning curve that takes a while, Jesman said. "It's usually several months before people get really comfortable with it."

It's not just doctors. Vassar Brothers Medical Center and St. Francis Hospital in Poughkeepsie, and Benedictine Hospital and Kingston Hospital in Kingston are participating. Also in the electronic loop are Quest Diagnostics and Laboratory Corporation of America. Many pharmacies, insurers and employers are involved.

Right now, what's available electronically is text material, including clinical reports, laboratory results and radiology results.

"Soon we'll be moving forward with new features," Jesman said.

Electronic records have been slow to come to the health-care field compared with many businesses.

Lee Jack, a Town of Poughkeepsie resident and a retired psychiatric nurse, recalls first seeing electronic records about 10 years ago when patient prescriptions were put on a hospital computer.

But most items were on paper, and still are today. "Anytime you need something from the records room, you got to send somebody, a messenger," Jack said.

"I think technology will finally catch up with us. I'm really for that," Jack said. "The only thing is, if they can still keep it private."

System developers believe security techniques are capable of doing that, but such assurances have not prevented notorious hacking or leaking incidents in other fields. Time will tell.

Right now, the focus seems to be on better care, saving money and saving time.

Time is a big one from Robinson's viewpoint. The doctor said the number of items to be covered in office visits by patients goes up every six months.

"You only have the same number of hours to cover them," Robinson said.

*Craig Wolf can be reached at [cwolf@poughkeepsiejournal.com](mailto:cwolf@poughkeepsiejournal.com)*

## **Resources**

For information on the Foundation for eHealth Initiative, call 1-202-624-3270 or go to <http://ccbh.ehealthinitiative.org>