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Health Care - Technology

Houston care providers sign up for information exchange system

Premium content from Houston Business Journal by Bayan Raji, Reporter

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The University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston is the latest medical institution in the Houston area to sign up with an organization that aims to electronically connect the region's health care providers.

To reduce skyrocketing health care costs and prevent the duplication of medical procedures, Greater Houston Healthconnect is creating a pipeline for a health information exchange system to facilitate sharing patient medical information.

Healthconnect received a \$5.6 million federal grant last year from the Texas Health Services Authority as seed money to create the infrastructure that would securely transmit important and relevant patient information from one health care provider to another throughout the 20-county region.

While the banking system set standards for electronic banking years ago, the health care industry overall has not done so because, until now, no one has forced the issue, Healthconnect CEO [Jim Langabeer](#) said. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services will begin to penalize hospitals and physicians if they are not compliant with meaningful exchange laws by 2014 — participating in a health information exchange is a key element of meaningful exchange. Penalties may include withholding a portion of Medicaid or Medicare reimbursement.

"There's going to be lots of different changes over time at the federal level," Langabeer said. "Eventually, virtually all providers will be engaged in some form of electronic information exchange."

Health care providers already store patient information in electronic medical records, and with help from Healthconnect will be able to “talk to” another hospital or medical care provider without making any changes to their systems. Its goal is to eventually have all TMC institutions as well as other health care providers in the area on board.

Giving physicians access to a patient’s medical history could prevent duplicate or unnecessary tests being performed, said [Beverly Dowling](#), assistant vice president of **UTMB Health System’s** community health network. That access could save hospitals substantial amounts of money.

The network also would allow care providers to quickly determine pre-existing conditions, drug allergies, medications the patient was prescribed and even if the prescription was filled. Since every minute can be vital for doctors working in an emergency room situation, quick access to a patient’s history may save his or her life, Chief of Emergency Medicine at **Baylor College of Medicine** [Shkelzen Hoxhaj](#) said.

Patients will have the choice to opt out, if they choose, but security measures are being taken to prevent unauthorized users from accessing patient information.

A network is only as good as the database behind it, though.

Currently, Christus Health, **Texas Children’s Hospital**, UTMB Galveston and Legacy Community Health Services are major Houston-area providers that have signed up for Healthconnect’s services, which are available for \$250 a year for physician offices and, based on size, from \$5,000 to \$100,000 a year for hospitals.

While providers eventually will be required to take part in a some form of health information exchange, penalties may not take effect until 2014. Langabeer said he hopes the momentum of UTMB, Christus and Texas Children’s will encourage other TMC members and providers throughout the region to join. UTMB plans to roll out its network usage in late spring.

Greater Houston Healthconnect

HQ: Houston

2012 OPERATING BUDGET: \$1.7 million

TOP EXEC: Jim Langabeer, CEO and president

EMPLOYEES: 8

FOUNDED: In 2010 as Greater Houston Health Information Exchange, renamed Greater Houston Healthconnect in 2011

OWNERSHIP: Nonprofit

WEB: ghhconnect.org

Bayan Raji covers health care.