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Regence pilot shows affordability of electronic medical records

On-line method spans barriers, reveals opportunities

Portland, Ore. — The future of health care visited LaGrande, Ore., courtesy of a pilot program funded by Regence BlueCross BlueShield of Oregon, winning over some fans in the medical community.

“We can’t imagine our office without electronic medical records. Our ability to view current patient records during an appointment has allowed us to streamline care and provide more efficient and effective care to our patients,” said Patrick McCarthy, M.D., a pediatric and adult urology specialist in LaGrande. “We’ve seen a huge improvement in our transcription turnaround to within 24 hours, and the system has allowed us to eliminate the gaps in care that can occur with paper records.”

Widely heralded as a solution to the fragmented health care system, e-health measures such as electronic medical records allow the free flow of patient information among doctors, testing labs, pharmacies and hospitals.

“There’s a lot of discussion in the industry about inefficient medical care and variable quality of care,” said Ralph Prows, M.D., Regence senior medical director. “One reason is that our medical information isn’t always where we need it to be. Electronic medical records would change that.”

The pilot aimed to connect the fragmented components of care in one community, and target the kind of error, waste and duplication of medical procedures that experts estimate devours up to 30 percent of health care dollars.

While agreement on the benefits of e-health measures is widespread, use is not: Less than nine percent of practices with one to three physicians use electronic records, according to a recent survey by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Among large practices, those with 50 or more providers, only half use electronic records in the U.S., compared to 83 percent physician use in the United Kingdom, 72 percent in Australia and 59 percent in the Netherlands, according to a 2006 Commonwealth Fund International survey.

Physicians cite cost as the primary barrier, especially to small practices like those in LaGrande. The Regence pilot overcame that hurdle by opting for Web-based services and a minimum of hardware. The pilot connected the lone hospital, test lab, pharmacies and health care providers in La Grande, Ore. Internet subscription fees and equipment, paid by Regence, came to about \$3000 per provider per year, well below the five- and six-figure estimates that some providers say discourages their investment.

“What this proved was that we can pull it all together for a reasonable cost,” said Dr. Prows.

The experiment prompted a range of responses in the medical community and revealed many areas for further examination that Regence will share with other stakeholders in the industry in its drive to promote e-health measures regionally and nationally.

- Provider practices exhibit widely varying levels of technical ability to adopt electronic medical records
- Community agreement on the technical specifications and information sharing is critical to success
- Regence may shift focus of future efforts to helping providers prepare from a workflow and technology standpoint to implement e-health measures

The LaGrande pilot program was one of several Regence commitments to invest in e-health measures as a key to transforming the health care system, and an exploratory effort to identify a role for the health plan in fostering wider electronic connectivity in health care.

About Regence

Regence is the largest health insurer in the Northwest / Mountain State Region, offering health, life and dental insurance. We serve three million members as Regence BlueCross BlueShield of Oregon, Regence BlueShield (in Washington), Regence BlueCross BlueShield of Utah and Regence BlueShield of Idaho. Each plan is a not-for-profit independent licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association. Regence is committed to improving the health of our members and our communities, and to transforming our health care system. For more information, please visit www.regence.com.

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