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Stimulus package funds give jolt to electronic record systems

North Coast hospitals and clinics hope for funds to convert records to new cost-saving system

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ALEX PAJUNAS — The Daily Astorian
Emma-Kate Dodge, a medical assistant at Coastal Family Health Center, demonstrates how the clinic has to transcribe information from each of the more than 3,000 clients for its annual reports. Boxes of records behind Dodge reached to the ceiling before the clinic began converting them to electronic files a year ago.

Federal stimulus package funds are coming in waves. And one wave that many hospitals and clinics hope to catch is intended to upgrade health care's health information technology.

President Barack Obama and former President George Bush have both advocated for electronic record systems to bring down health care costs. These systems would replace the paper records that included doctors' orders and notes.

But the systems are very expensive and most hospitals would likely have to spend millions of dollars to completely convert to an institution-wide system. A recent article in the Wall Street Journal reported a national survey published in the New England Journal of Medicine revealed that only 9 percent of U.S. hospitals have electronic health records for their patients.

Part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is intended to provide hospitals and clinics with the funds they need to convert their records to electronic systems.

Most of the departments in Columbia Memorial Hospital use an internal system.

"All of our patients' files are kept on a portable electronic unit they move right to the patient's bedside," said Steve Buckelew, the director of marketing at Columbia Memorial

Hospital. He said the hospital had been instituting the system for the past two to three years. He said that 50 percent of clinics in the hospital use the system, and CMH hopes to have all in the system by the end of the year.

"It's not a full system, but we're on that path," Buckelew said.

"I think that we, as a whole, are farther along than most places," said Tom Winter, CMH's information technology manager.

He said records from CMH can be shared with Legacy Emanuel Hospital in Portland.

"We've built a system to connect our system to theirs. There's an example of working with another care provider to share information," Winter said. "If you have to go see a urologist, we could ship electronic versions to your doctor and they can plug it in."

Providence Seaside Hospital leaders believe they are ahead of the curve in health information technology. Patti Atkins, PSH director of public relations, said the hospital has been "highly integrated for a number of years."

She said patients' records are available at any Providence hospital. She said it's not unusual for a patient to receive treatment at Seaside, then receive a treatment at another hospital. The patients' records follow them and are available at the other hospital, including all radiology - X-rays, MRIs and CT scans.

"Nurses, chaplains, everybody who sees you is listed on the chart," Atkins said.

She added that if a family needs added services at home, a chaplain can include that too.

Winter said CMH is looking to see if it might qualify for stimulus funds as it moves toward a complete electronic records system.

And he said the ideal situation would be a system that allowed universal sharing.

"The great thing - when that does happen - that's going to drive down costs," he said. "It surely should lower our costs - lower the costs of health care."

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