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Physicians, patients connect on the Web

BY PATRICIA ANSTETT • FREE PRESS MEDICAL WRITER • FEBRUARY 8, 2009

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A growing number of patients are entering a new era of medicine, choosing to be online, not on hold, with their doctors' offices.

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In a glimpse at how the practice of medicine is changing, Michigan's doctor practices are adding electronic programs to cut telephone tag and unnecessary office visits for routine health questions, prescription refills, lab results and appointment requests.

Patients also can create personal electronic health accounts where they can store important medical records or get information about a health issue e-mailed to them.

And more doctors are dispensing medical advice through an eVisit -- a mouse call, as some call the pared-down, technology version of a house call. It describes a range of medical advice, sometimes a running dialogue, in which a doctor can monitor how a person is managing a chronic health issue or an immediate non-urgent condition.

"I'm totally sold on how useful it is," said Dr. Barbara Saul, a family medicine doctor at the Henry Ford Health System's Troy center and one of the leaders in the concept.

Recently, Saul met with Gerardus Zwergers, 50, of Rochester to discuss keeping on top of his elevated blood pressure. She told Zwergers to buy a blood pressure cuff to monitor his readings and to "eVisit your recordings to me" in 10 days.

Zwergers, an engineering manager with a hybrid battery company, said eVisits should help him get his blood pressure readings back to normal even if he is traveling. He said he has no concerns the information will be misused. "My entire life is online already."

The Ford system, with 30,000 eVisits last year, is further along than other Michigan health systems. Ford's subsidiary, Health Alliance Plan, reimburses Henry Ford Medical Group doctors \$20 for a

documented eVisit.

Insurance reimbursement has been a drawback, as health plans study whether the concept helps improve health and save money. EVisits may be free covered insurance benefits or require a co-



DAVID DALTON/Special to the Free Press

Dr. Kenneth Bollin guides first-year resident Dr. Michael Grabinski as he records patient data electronically at St. John Family Medical Center in St. Clair Shores. Bollin says the system helps him oversee residents.

DOCTORS' OFFICE ONLINE

Online or on hold? Take your pick. Here are some services you may be able to handle electronically.

- Create a personal health page to record vaccinations, medicines and tests. You also can arrange to handle information about a particular health issue sent to your health account.
- Communicate with doctors about a health question.
- Request an appointment.
- Pay bills.
- Order prescriptions.
- Get laboratory results.

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Blue Care Network, a subsidiary of Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan, and Aetna Inc. pay \$30 for eVisits to primary care doctors. Priority Health, based in Grand Rapids, plans to begin paying for eVisits in April. Spokeswoman Juanita Vorel said reimbursement has not yet been determined and may vary by regions in the state.

Matt Walsh, associate vice president of purchase initiatives at HAP, said all adult primary care medical practices, about 300 physicians, will be trained in eVisits and other programs by the end of February.

"Initial feedback from doctors and patients has been 100% positive," he said. "It's very convenient and easy to use." Measurements of good patient care also have increased with the concept, he said, though "it's too early to say if there are savings" by eliminating unnecessary calls and doctor visits, he said. "The sentiment is, there will be savings."

St. John and University of Michigan health systems are testing eVisits programs and other online patient communication tools in their family medicine practices.

U-M has enrolled 543 patients in eVisit programs at its Briarwood and Chelsea family medicine centers and is finding the arrangements convenient for patients and cost-effective, said Dr. Jean Malouin, associate chair for clinical programs in family medicine.

St. John will decide this week whether to expand the eVisit program.

Electronic records save time

Dr. Kenneth Bollin, chair of family medicine for St. John, uses a variety of electronic programs and likes that he can dispense prescriptions and advice from his laptop when he's on vacation. He also sees the electronic systems as a good way to oversee the training of residents, so he can discuss in person notes they've entered into a patient's record, rather than trying to read a doctor's handwriting.

Electronic medical records let a user create a personal [computer](#) file that lists a person's health history, including information about shots, medicines, treatments and lab results.

The Ford system adds a feature called pit stops, where patients can enter health measurements into a spreadsheet for conditions like high blood pressure and diabetes.

These days, a person's electronic health record often begins at birth, like the one created recently for Kaiden Orlando, who came to see Bollin last month for a routine well-baby visit three weeks after his birth.

"I'll certainly use it," said Kaiden's mother, Skye Roll, 34, of Warren.

The Huron Valley Physicians Association has had a system from Raleigh-based Medfusion since August 2007. In its first 10 months, the doctors' group handled 45,000 communications with patients and last year scheduled 1,500 appointments electronically.

"That's 1,500 [phone calls](#) we didn't get," said Dr. Larry Adler, who chairs the specialty division of the Ann Arbor physicians practice, with 750 doctors. "People thank us for doing this."

On a recent weekend, Adler answered an e-mail from a patient with ulcerative colitis who developed traveler's diarrhea while in Mexico on vacation. Adler told him he could obtain an antibiotic over-the-counter if symptoms lasted three days.

Adler said the practice has held off adding eVisits until reimbursement issues are resolved with other insurers. "It's bad enough doing all the phone work we do that we're not compensated for," he said.

Legislation backed by President Barack Obama would give financial help to doctors purchasing electronic medical records systems.

"It would revolutionize health care," said Michael Sappington, president and chief executive

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Contact **PATRICIA ANSTETT** at 313-222-5021 or panstett@freepress.com.