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Nonprofit is artery of info for doctors

Clinical messaging system, DOCS4DOCS, links care sites, providers to share patients' records

By **Chuck Bowen**

Star correspondent

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In the mid-1990s, Dr. Marc Overhage had a problem.

He and other faculty members at Indiana University School of Medicine were seeing dozens of patients from Central Indiana at different hospitals. As Overhage and the other doctors moved from hospital to hospital, so did their patients.

But their records didn't.

"The poor doctor -- me -- didn't often have their records. It's a very practical problem," said Overhage, who helped form the Indiana Health Information Exchange in 2004.

The Health Information Exchange since has taken up the daunting task of linking all hospitals, pharmacies, private laboratories and other medical care facilities with one another to share patient information. The goal, Overhage said, is to prevent duplication of services, create more efficient health care and, ultimately, improve the quality of patients' lives.

While many major metropolitan areas have similar systems, Indiana's was one of the first and is viewed by many as one of the best.

"It's been a model for the rest of the country, frankly. The approaches (IHIE) has taken have been shared widely," said Janet Marchibroda, chief executive of eHealth Initiative, a nonprofit group based in Washington that supports expanded use of more medical data technology.

"They've truly been pioneers," she said. "Anytime anyone wants to talk about this, they call Indiana."

The eHealth Initiative was one of many organizations that gave the Health Information Exchange early seed money -- roughly \$700,000 since 2003. The federal government has put up about \$2 million in grants to help promote more efficient health-care informatics in Indiana, and BioCrossroads and private groups gave the Health Information Exchange \$1 million.

Overhage said the company's goal is to bring some cohesiveness and consistency to the often fragmented field of medical record keeping.

He said a recent study of Boston hospitals found 14 percent of information about a patient never gets to his or her doctor or arrives too late.

"It's a pretty substantial rate," Overhage said. "There's no reason to think it's any different anywhere else. Having the right information makes a big difference."

The Health Information Exchange's main service is its clinical messaging program, DOCS4DOCS, developed by the Regenstrief Institute. In the past, doctors waited days for results of routine tests to be faxed, mailed or even hand-delivered to their offices, Overhage said. Each year sees 30 billion of these information transactions -- at an estimated cost exceeding \$24 billion.

Hospitals that share information electronically with doctors, who then share information with pharmacies, which share information with private labs, would allow for health-care providers at all stages of a patient's care to know crucial information such as what medications he takes and what his family medical history is, Overhage said.

All that data would be available 24 hours a day -- from emergency rooms to specialists' offices. DOCS4DOCS now is used by more than 5,000 physicians at 25 Indiana hospitals.

"They think it's the right thing to do for the community. That is the most important thing," Overhage said of trying to persuade so many competing doctors and health-care providers to cooperate.

The Health Information Exchange also has launched a program, Quality Health First of Indiana, to improve the consistency of health care.

By combining medical and drug claims data from participating health plans with patient prescription drug data, lab and test results from the Indiana Network for Patient Care database, Quality Health First aims to create reports to help physicians treat patients.

Meanwhile, Overhage said he hopes to expand the information exchange to cover the entire state.

When the organization started in 2004, it had two employees. Now, it has 20 on staff and plans to double that number by year's end.

In another sign of its growth, it recently moved out of Indiana University's Emerging Technologies Center and into its own headquarters in Downtown Indianapolis.

To that end, Overhage said, the organization also recently added two hospitals in the Lafayette area -- Arnett HealthSystem and Greater Lafayette Health Systems -- to the clinical messaging system and wants to expand into rural areas of the state.

Dr. Craig Brater, dean of IU's medical school, said the Health Information Exchange's work was a good step toward "personalized medicine."

Under such a system, doctors can look at a patient's symptoms and search records to find others with similar symptoms, genetic histories and medical problems to help predict and treat whatever ailment is present, said Brater, who is a Health Information Exchange board member.

"It has enormous potential. It would be to everybody's advantage if we could get this out into the (state-wide) community," he said. "All of that will ultimately result in better care."