

THE BUFFALO NEWS

85,000 patient consents are on file

2 hospitals to submit records to database

Niagara County sites join HEALTHeLINK

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NIAGARA FALLS — The two hospitals in western Niagara County announced Monday that they are joining the regional computer system for sharing patient health records.

Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center hosted a news conference to announce that it and Mount St. Mary's Hospital of Lewiston are joining HEALTHeLINK, the system set up last year by the region's major health insurers and hospital groups.

"There are 25 million reports now available. We're growing at 1.7 million reports per month," said Daniel E. Porreca, the system's executive director.

Information about patients isn't shared unless they sign a consent form.

The original participants of HEALTHeLINK included Kaleida Health, the Catholic Health System, Erie County Medical Center, Roswell Park Cancer Institute, Univera Healthcare, Independent Health Association and HealthNow New York, which is the corporate name for BlueCross and BlueShield of Western New York.

In addition, the network has signed up WCA Hospital in Jamestown, Olean General Hospital, United Memorial Medical Center in Batavia and Quest Diagnostics, the area's top outpatient laboratory organization. Porreca said 275 doctors, including the Buffalo Medical Group, also are on board.

The purpose of the system is to make health histories immediately available to doctors anywhere in the system who might be treating a particular patient.

Although HEALTHeLINK launched in 2008, older data is available through prescription and other claim records processed through the insurers.

"Between Quest and the hospitals, we have north of 90 percent of the lab data in the region," Porreca said.

"It just makes so much common sense," said Joseph A. Ruffolo, president and chief executive officer of Niagara Falls Memorial. He said the sharing of information will avoid duplicative tests on patients.

"Too often our hospitals have been viewed as being too competitive. We do work together where we can," said Judith A. Maness, president and CEO of Mount St. Mary's.

"Patients don't have to worry about their information not being available. It will follow [you] wherever you are," said Dr. Michael Cropp, chairman of HEALTHeLINK and president and CEO of Independent Health.

Porreca said 80,000 to 85,000 patient consents are on file so far, with few patients refusing. He estimated 97 percent of patients asked by their primary care doctor have signed the form, along with more than 90 percent at hospitals and specialists' offices.

"Patient information is more safe electronically than it is in paper form," Porreca said.

Cropp urged doctors and other hospitals not already in HEALTHeLINK to look into federal reimbursements for electronic medical records included in the new federal health care reform law.

However, for the time being, HEALTHeLINK is not charging a fee for new members.

"I'm not going to sit here and say that's always going to be that way. We want to have a sustainable business, but we want to demonstrate the value," Porreca said.

Peggy Grandinetti, chief information officer at Niagara Falls Memorial, said her staff worked on the project for more than a year.

Cropp said that, counting the value of work time, the cost to start the system was \$15 million to \$20 million.