

Report shows local increase in electronic prescriptions

By Henry L. Davis

NEWS MEDICAL REPORTER

Updated: July 19, 2010, 7:01 am /

Published: July 19, 2010, 12:30 am

A new report shows a significant increase in the last two years in the number of medications in upstate New York that are prescribed electronically instead of on paper.

Electronic prescribing is catching on among doctors, according to the analysis by Univera Healthcare. But it still remains a practice among a minority of physicians — 27 percent of doctors in Western New York and about 24 percent overall in upstate.

The health insurer's number-crunching also suggests that upstate New Yorkers might avoid more than two million adverse drug events caused by handwriting errors if all physicians in the region started using electronic prescribing.

“As doctors become more comfortable with information technology, e-prescribing will become more mainstream,” said Dr. Robert J. Holzhauser, vice president and chief medical officer at Univera, a subsidiary of Excellus Blue Cross Blue Shield in Rochester.

The report found that 17 percent of prescriptions in upstate were prescribed electronically in the first quarter of 2010, an increase from 12 percent of 21.1 million prescriptions overall in 2009.

The analysis is based partly on data from Surescripts, a national electronic prescription network, which earlier this year reported that the portion of electronic prescriptions nationwide had increased from 6 percent at the end of 2008 to 18 percent at the end of 2009.

Electronic prescribing allows doctors to transmit prescriptions through a secure Internet network directly to pharmacies using a computer or handheld device.

Advocates say e-prescribing can reduce prescription errors, pick up potential drug interactions and cut costs, as well as save patients time waiting in drugstores. Medication errors harm 1.5 million people a year, according to a 2006 report by the Institute of Medicine, which advises the government.

Holzhauser also said an estimated 30 percent of prescriptions that are not prescribed by computer require a callback from the pharmacy, such as to check on the clarity of the handwriting or to add missing information.

The biggest barrier to electronic prescribing is cost, experts say. But that's changing as the federal government and other groups offer financial incentives, including bonus payments for doctors when they treat Medicare patients.

In Western New York, HEALTHeLINK is the organization at the center of efforts to create an electronic network that links patients, doctors and insurers so they can easily share medical records, including prescriptions.

So far, it has signed up 700 health care providers, including physicians and nurse practitioners, in the region.

"One of the challenges is that this is a big change for many doctors, moving from paper to the computer. It's a workload thing," said Daniel E. Porreca, HEALTHeLINK's executive director.

"But there's also a growing realization that this isn't a passing fad," he said. "It's where the industry is headed."

Dr. Jennifer Ruh, an Orchard Park family physician, is part of a medical group that became an early adopter of electronic medical records and electronic prescribing.

In addition to reducing the risk of errors from poor legibility, the systems allow doctors to see what other drugs patients have been prescribed by physicians at other medical offices or at hospitals.

"You have a very exact log of who is prescribing, to which pharmacy and at what dose," she said.