

Tuesday, April 13, 2010

Memorial, St. Mary's get 'HEALThe'



PHOTOS BY DAN CAPPELLAZZO

JOINING FORCES: Flanked by Independent Health President and CEO Dr. Michael Cropp, Memorial Medical Center CEO Joseph A. Ruffolo speaks about a new partnership with Mount St. Mary's Hospital and Independent Health during a news conference to announce the new venture called HEALTHeLINK.

MEDICINE: *Become members of clinical medical information sharing network.*

BY RICK PFEIFFER
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It's on the cutting edge of medical information technology.

Those who believe in it say HEALTHeLINK is the key to providing better and more cost effective health care for Western New Yorkers.

Now the Niagara Region's two largest hospitals will become the newest participants in the clinical information exchange.

At a Monday morning news conference, Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center and Mount St. Mary's Hospital officials both said they were signing on with HEALTHeLINK and would urge their patients to start giving consent for their clinical information to be made available to participating health care providers.

"The collaboration with HEALTHeLINK and hospitals and doctors and health plans, at its core, is about saving lives and saving money," said Daniel Porreca, executive director of HEALTHeLINK.

As an example of how HEALTHeLINK works, Porreca told reporters to imagine a case where a patient arrives at an emergency room unconscious. The team of doctors looking to care for you has no knowledge of your medical history, including what medications you might be taking or what lab or radiology studies may have been done on you recently.

"By having your information available on HEALTHeLINK, your records become your voice and guide your treatment," Porreca said.

Mount St. Mary's and Memorial will become the first Niagara County Hospitals to join HEALTHeLINK. Joining the net-

work will allow the two hospitals to electronically share and access patient health information. Memorial President and CEO Joseph Ruffolo said other hospitals will also join the network.

"It just makes so much common sense," he said. "It's obviously about saving lives, being more efficient and improving medical care."

Mount St. Mary's President and CEO Judith Maness said both hospitals have been working for the last year to create systems that would allow them to join HEALTHeLINK.

"We have been working for a long time to put information in the hands of caregivers," she said. "We welcome HEALTHeLINK to our community."

HEALTHeLINK is not a medical records keeping system, but rather a so-called information highway that allows for important clinical medical records, maintained by a wide range of health care providers, to be shared quickly to better manage patient care.

"(A patient's medical records) will follow them wherever they are," said Dr. Michael Cropp, the president and CEO of Independent Health and the chairman of the HEALTHeLINK board of directors. "It will help us build a more sustainable health care system."

The chairman of HEALTHeLINK's physician advisory committee, Dr. Raghu Ram, who is also the senior medical director for BlueCross BlueShield of Western New York, said this region has been "in the forefront of clinical information exchange."

"Providing health care professionals with information, securely, is central for quality and cost control," Ram said. "It will also help in preventive care. It will move us beyond putting out fires and dealing with illness to preventing illness. Better utilization of data will move



ALL SMILES: HealthLink executive director Daniel E. Porreca speaks about HEALTHeLINK at Monday's news conference.

us beyond the fee for service to the quality outcomes model (of health care)."

Porreca emphasized the most critical component to the success of HEALTHeLINK is patient consent to have their records shared. He said when patients see their health care providers or seek treatment, they'll be asked to sign consent forms that will enable their records to be shared.

So far, Porreca said, 90 percent of patients who are asked to sign a consent by their primary doctor, are agreeing to record sharing.

"Patients know they're information doesn't get to all doctors (right now)," Ram said. "But now they're excited that (records sharing) is possible."

HEALTHeLINK was established with funding by Kaleida Health, the Catholic Health System, Roswell Park Cancer Institute, Erie County Medical Center, BlueCross BlueShield of Western New York, Univera Healthcare and Independent Health Association.

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