

THE BUFFALO NEWS



Daniel E. Porreca, HEALTHeLINK executive director, speaks during a panel discussion on Electronic Medical Records and the Future of Medical Technology in Buffalo on Wednesday. *Mark Mulville*

Switching to electronic medical records

Doctors and patients should see benefit in change, panel says

By **Matt Glynn**

News Business Reporter

Published: 2010-07-29 08:48:16.0

The shift toward electronic medical records is taking root, a change that should benefit doctors and patients alike.

That was the message from members of a panel discussion hosted Wednesday by Infotech Niagara, an information technology group.

Electronic medical records bring together a patient's health history from different sources. The goal is to increase efficiency, give doctors more information to work with and spot potential risks, like prescription drugs that could cause an adverse reaction if allowed to interact.

Part of the shift is personal, getting employees of medical practices to embrace moving away from paper records, said Daniel J. Scully, chief executive officer of the Buffalo Medical Group. He cited the example of the scheduling books used by his group's medical assistants.

"There were days when I had to pick them off the desks, close them and walk away with them," Scully said. "I had to say, 'Here's the computer, you're going to use that.' "

Younger doctors were sometimes more reluctant to adopt electronic medical records than older doctors, he said. "It's preparation, and attitude and ready for change."

Once doctors committed to the switch, "they did not lose production on a yearly basis," Scully said. "They were as successful as they were in the paper-based world."

Buffalo Medical Group is about 85 percent finished with its electronic medical records installation, Scully said.

Dr. Raghu Ram, medical director for BlueCross BlueShield of Western New York, agreed that education and easing the transition for physicians are as much part of the shift as adopting the technology.

Smaller medical practices might be worried about losing productivity as they make the switch to electronic medical records, by reducing the number of patients they can see each week, he said. Some practices are coping by making the transition slowly, while others budget to make the shift all at once, he said.

Some practices might also be worried about losing medical information in an electronic system, when they are used to retrieving data quickly on paper, Ram said.

"When you go to an electronic medical record, it might be faster," he said. "But until the training of those practitioners occurs, there could be a potential gap. And a risk of missing medical information and not maintaining a continuity of high quality of care is another major concern for physicians and clinicians."

Scully said Buffalo Medical Group's electronic system identified patients at risk for acute aortic aneurysms, a problem not often caught during routine office visits. Using data from its electronic system, 2,500 patients were screened, 40 people underwent surgery and 140 are being monitored electronically, he said.

Dr. Daniel E. Porreca, HEALTHeLINK's executive director, said an electronic medical record can be crucial in situations such as an emergency room visit when a patient cannot communicate. "Your electronic record literally becomes your voice at that point," he said.

HEALTHeLINK is helping physicians make the transition to electronic medical records. The clinical information exchange is supported by BlueCross BlueShield, Independent Health and Univera Healthcare. It recently received a \$16.1 million federal stimulus grant to advance its work in health information technology.

Electronic medical recordkeeping also makes patients more aware of their own health, said Deborah O'Shea, chief legal and compliance officer for Advantage Home Telehealth.

"When a patient is actively engaged in monitoring their own health, they become much more accountable," O'Shea said. "Right now I would say people know more about what's going on with

the health of their car than their own health, because they've really abdicated that to a third party. And that's not really fair to the clinician."

But if people with a chronic condition like diabetes monitor their condition from home, they also track their blood pressure, weight and blood glucose level, and the data is transmitted into an electronic medical record.

"There's no fudging. It's done wirelessly. It is what it is," she said. When the physician and the patient meet, both of them have an accurate picture to work with, she added.

Porreca said he considers Western New York among the leading regions in the nation when it comes to adopting electronic medical records.

"We still have a long way to go, but from an overall perspective, we're encouraged by the trend," he said following the panel discussion.

Porreca credited collaboration by local health care leaders, including from hospitals and health insurers, with promoting the adoption of electronic medical records.

"They've really taken a leadership role here in the community," he said.

© **The Buffalo News**