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Iowa Health System offers e-prescribing software

By Joe Gardyas
Senior Staff Writer

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Could your doctor's poor penmanship kill you?

Statistically speaking, it could. Each year an estimated 1.5 million Americans suffer drug-related injuries and more than 7,000 die from preventable medication errors linked to illegible handwriting on prescription forms, according to the Institute of Medicine, the health-care arm of the National Academy of Sciences.

From left, Allscripts CEO Glen Tullman and Iowa Health System President and CEO Bill Leaver listen as state Sen. Jack Hatch speaks during an unveiling of ePrescribe Iowa. At far right is Dr. Joel Waymire, a Windsor Heights pediatrician who has e-prescribed for the past 10 years. Photo by Joe Gardyas

To counter this trend, Iowa Health System last week announced the launch of ePrescribe Iowa, an electronic prescription software program it is offering free to all Iowa physicians.

"As Iowa's largest integrated health-care system, we felt it was our responsibility to lead the way by providing a program that adds critical patient safety," said Bill Leaver, president and CEO of Iowa Health System.

"Electronic prescribing helps eliminate errors, improve patient safety and reduce costs by making the prescribing process more efficient, more effective," he said. "Making the switch to electronic prescribing is one of the first steps towards a fully connected electronic health record, which is a national health-care priority."

The program, offered through a partnership with Chicago-based Allscripts-Misys Healthcare Solutions Inc., is the first statewide initiative in the country to offer free e-prescribing software and training to physicians, Leaver said.

The companies did not provide financial details of the partnership, but said the the cost for a physician's office to purchase such software would otherwise range from \$3,000 to \$4,000.

In January, Medicare began paying bonuses to physicians who switch their patients to e-prescriptions. Doctors will receive a bonus equal to 2 percent of their charges billed to

Medicare this year and next, decreasing to 1 percent in 2011 and 2012 and one-half percent in 2013. Physicians who don't e-prescribe will have their Medicare reimbursements cut by 1 percent beginning in 2012, with the penalty increasing to 2 percent in 2014 and beyond.

Approximately 143,000 physicians in the United States, or about one in four doctors, are currently e-prescribing. That's twice the number who were e-prescribing in 2008, according to Surescripts, the company that runs the network that routes prescriptions between doctors and pharmacies.

Of the 6,000 physicians practicing in Iowa, just over 700 currently have e-prescribing software, according to Surescripts. Only about 3 percent of prescriptions in the state were done electronically last year.

"A lot of physicians have the capability to use it, but don't," said Glen Tullman, CEO of Allscripts. "That's why we think the key is local training and support. Our representatives will go to the doctors in Iowa that enroll in the program."

Tullman said he's hopeful Allscripts will benefit from the program by gaining business from physicians seeking to add a full-scale electronic health record system. The ePrescribe software's medication database performs instant checks for drug interactions, dosage levels, prior adverse reactions and other safety measures. And its handwriting is impeccable.

Physicians can use the ePrescribe Iowa software on any Internet-enabled device through the Internet; Iowa Health clinics and hospitals will access the program through their existing connections on HealthNet Connect, Iowa Health's statewide fiber-optic communications network.

In Greater Des Moines, Mercy Clinics Inc. has two pilot projects under way that include electronic prescribing, said Gregg Lagan, a spokesman for Mercy Medical Center - Des Moines. However, physicians at Mercy Clinics are not writing prescriptions electronically at this time, he said.

"Electronic prescription systems are also being reviewed by Mercy's ownership, Catholic Health Initiatives (CHI), as part of the move to electronic health records," Lagan said. "CHI is receiving input from its hospitals and clinic systems to select a system and process that will best serve the overall e-health requirements. CHI and Mercy Clinics have reviewed the Allscripts system and are aware of the technology and what it can offer."