Business

MENDOCINO COUNTY
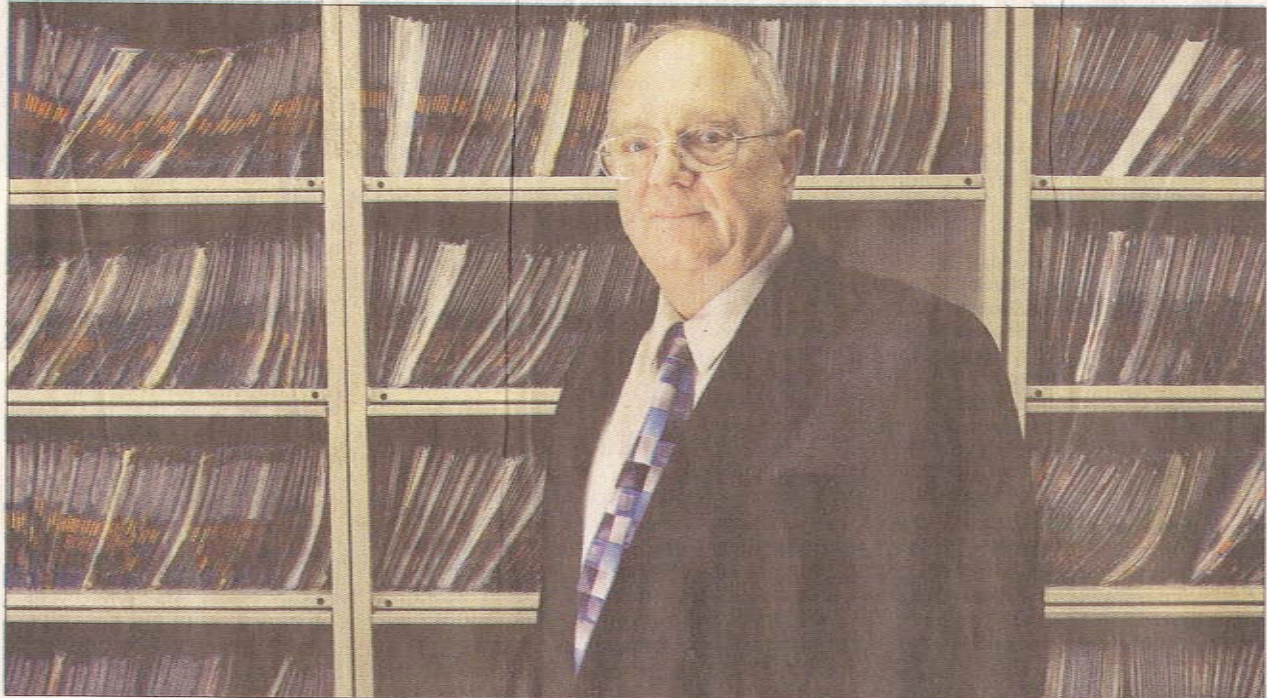
MARK ARONOFF / The Press Democrat

Dr. Carl Henning, a Ukiah orthopedic surgeon, is launching an alternative to expensive computer systems for electronic medical records utilizing an Internet site. Eventually, paper records like these in his office will disappear as the information is stored digitally.

Tracking patients without the cost

Instead of investing in expensive software, doctors can access lab results, scans on secure Web site

By CAROL BENFELL

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Mendocino County doctors have launched a pilot project that could provide a low-cost alternative to costly computer software systems for tracking patient care.

Called a "clinical message service," the project allows doctors to access patient test results and imaging scans on a secure Web site.

If successful, the service can be expanded to add drug prescribing functions and to store patient data, said Carl Henning, a Ukiah orthopedic surgeon who helped launch a similar clinical message service in Santa Cruz.

At that point, the service would offer many of the functions of electronic medical records systems, without nearly the cost, Henning said.

"Many doctors are struggling to make a living. They look at these $15,000 software programs and say they can't afford it," Henning said. "In Santa Cruz, we gave doctors at least 80 percent of the functionality of an electronic medical records system at no cost" to them.

The Ukiah pilot project, funded by $250,000 from the Blue Shield of California Foundation, is part of a national program to create ways to bring medical care into the electronic age. If successful, it could become a model for other rural communities, Henning said.

"I want to improve the quality of care — that's No. 1," Henning said. "I also want to benefit local doctors' bottom line, by helping them be more efficient and get

CLINICAL MESSAGE SERVICE

What's happening? A Ukiah nonprofit organization has launched a pilot project that might lead to an alternative to costly electronic medical records software for physicians' office computers.

How does it work? Instead of installing software in each doctor's office, the Redwood MedNet system puts the software on a Web site that doctors can access.

What information can doctors get? In the pilot project, only test results from labs and hospitals will be available. Later, the Web site could be expanded to include a prescription drug function and to store patient data.

How much does it cost? The pilot project under way in Ukiah is being financed by a grant from the Blue Shield of California Foundation. After the pilot period, participants may pay a nominal fee.

How would a fully developed message service compare with a conventional electronic medical records system? It is an exchange for medical records only. It can't do other things a medical records system can do, such as determine the proper billing codes on insurance claims and do the billing, keep track of patient accounts and schedule appointments.

Why do they think it will work? Clinical messaging services are up and operating in four U.S. cities, including Santa Cruz.

TRACKING: Switch to message service could improve patient care, reduce medical errors

more work done."

The drive to put doctors and hospitals on electronic records systems took off with the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996. The law established a process to set standards for digitized medical records systems, procedures to protect patient privacy and a series of deadlines.

The switch to electronic records would mean that any authorized doctor could instantly access a patient's complete medical history, improving patient care and reducing medical errors that can occur when paper medical records aren't available.

But the push for electronic medical records systems concerns privacy advocates, who fear patients' private health information could be stolen or misused.

Major hospitals in Sonoma County have already begun the shift, but doctors' offices have been slower to move to the new technology.

Part of the problem is cost. The software, installation and training program for a solo medical practice can cost $10,000 to $20,000, and can quickly rise to $50,000 for a practice with two doctors and several assistants. That doesn't include the cost of scanning in patient medical records, said Mark Spongberg, president of Health-Tech Solutions, which sells medical records software and training packages.

The clinical message service now being tested in Ukiah doesn't do as much as an electronics record system, but it costs far less to install because it puts the software on a Web site where doctors can use it instead of requiring each doctor to buy the software.

"A clinical message service is about how you get and send medical records. It doesn't run your practice the way an electronic health records system would," said Will Ross, the Ukiah project manager. "An EMR is more than records. It schedules patients and does the billing and accounting and all that kind of stuff."

Clinical message systems are up and running in four places: Santa Cruz, Cincinnati, Indianapolis and New York's Hudson River Valley.

But the Ukiah service, which will serve doctors, hospitals and laboratories in Mendocino and Lake counties, is the first trial in a rural area.

The pilot project was developed by nonprofit Redwood MedNet, of which Henning is president. MedNet is part of the California Regional Health Information Organization, a collaborative, statewide effort to foster health information data exchange.

The project is narrowly focused to allow time for doctors to get used to the service and to be sure it is on a firm financial footing before it expands, Henning said.

For now, labs and hospitals will enter their test results electronically into a secured Web site instead of faxing them to the doctor or posting them on their own Web sites.

The message service Web site sorts and sifts the documents, so a doctor can punch in his code and receive all his patients' tests in one place.

Laboratories and hospitals will pay a small fee for each document they send. The senders still save money, because it's cheaper to e-mail than to fax records, Henning said. Doctors pay nothing to receive them.

The 25 medical practices participating in the pilot are expected to send up to 4,000 lab results and other records each month. The practices are located in Fort Bragg, Ukiah, Lakeport and nearby communities.

While the service is currently limited, it's still valuable, said Brad Drexler, a Healdsburg obstetrician and president-elect of the Sonoma County Medical Association.

"It's not the same as an EMR, but it's helpful," Drexler said. "Trying to collect every lab result and X-ray can be very time-consuming. Yet it's very beneficial to have them when the patient comes to see you."

If the message service works well, Redwood MedNet can purchase existing software that allows doctors to prescribe drugs electronically. The system can also be expanded to store the locations of a patient's electronic medical records and pull those records up on command, Henning said.

"Then if someone comes into the emergency room with a heart attack, the doctor can go to the database and get all their old EKGs," Henning said.

The Santa Cruz clinical messaging service was started in 1993 by Henning and fellow physician Robert Keet, a Santa Cruz internist.

The Santa Cruz service now serves 200 physicians in the Santa Cruz area and receives more than 1 million hits a month.

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REDWOOD MEDNET