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Companies join forces on 'medical Internet' Savings, better care may result

By Los Angeles Times | December 7, 2006

WASHINGTON -- Five major US corporations have joined forces to create a "medical Internet" on which some 2.5 million workers can bring together their personal health records in one secure location, providing access to everything from prescriptions and cholesterol readings to medical histories.

The system, unveiled yesterday, could reduce the chances of medical mistakes, improve treatment of chronic illnesses, and eventually save billions of dollars by avoiding duplicative services, its designers say.

Under the present system, such information -- often in the form of cumbersome paper records -- is usually scattered among the files of doctors, pharmacists, and other providers. That can make it difficult to coordinate treatment.

If the experiment works, experts say most of the country could follow suit within the next several years, though privacy advocates say stronger safeguards are needed.

The venture reflects growing concern that healthcare costs of US workers might be unsustainable in the global economy. Employers pay most of America's \$2 trillion-a-year healthcare bill. Many corporate leaders have concluded that inefficiencies in the system add to those costs.

Indeed, the National Association of Manufacturers said it would spearhead an effort to convince big companies to quickly adopt electronic records. And next week, major insurers are planning to unveil a model medical record for use in computer systems.

The five companies in the consortium contributed \$1.5 million each to create the system, called Dossia. The firms -- Applied Materials, BP America, [Intel Corp.](#), Pitney Bowes, and Wal-Mart -- contracted with an independent third party to design and operate it.

The companies plan to start signing up employees by mid-2007. Among them, they cover 2.5 million workers, family members and retirees. The system's operator, the nonprofit Omnimedix Institute of Portland, Ore., hopes to open it to other companies soon thereafter, for a modest per-employee fee.

The companies said the system can do more than increase efficiency. By giving patients detailed information, it also can promote healthier behavior and more efficient and effective treatment, which in turn could save more money.

"The benefit of this system has to be in the hundreds of billions," said Michael J. Critelli, chairman and CEO of Pitney Bowes.

Participation in Dossia would be voluntary; the electronic record would become an employee's property. ■

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