

News

Firm logs instant feedback on doctor visits

The Wellby patient-feedback system has been tested for the last year at the Bucks County practice of Drs. Kim Kuhar and Niccole Oswald. Dr. Kuhar said the system, developed by local firm CarePartners Plus, helps with better patient outcomes and higher insurance reimbursements.

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The machine is called Wellby, inspired by the TV doctor of the 1970s whose last name had one fewer "l" - and copyright protection.

Despite its inanimate parts, Wellby is intended to be as endearing as the ever-personable Dr. Marcus Welby, and just as able to coax patients to open up.

Officials from Horsham start-up CarePartners Plus L.L.C. said their primary goal in creating Wellby was to better involve patients in their own health management.

From that should follow a better line of communication between doctor and patient, an improved treatment experience and, ultimately, cost reductions - all of which are the aim of health-care reform, CarePartners' leaders said.

Malpractice claims might also decline, they said.

"This whole area of patient-interactive health-care management is here to stay," said Gordon Woodrow, a former regional director of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services who is now chief spokesman for CarePartners.

With its touch screen and a card swipe for patients to optionally identify themselves, Wellby strongly resembles an ATM. But instead of cash, the kiosk dispenses questions to patients just after they see the doctor, to collect timely feedback on those visits. The questions, which can be tailored to a person's specific disease or ailment, are designed to ensure that patients understand their diagnoses and any prescribed remedies.

The underlying premise: that patients are reluctant to criticize their doctors or tell them that they don't understand something they've said.

"People will tell the computer the truth faster than they will tell a person," said Martha Jean Minniti. A registered nurse with a long entrepreneurial history, she is one of CarePartners' four founders.

Those health-care professionals formed the company five years ago, when the concept of electronic health records was in its infancy and the question of how patients would fit into that high-tech world was uncertain.

Taking a cue from banks, CarePartners settled on the touch screen as a means of communication between patients and their health providers.

They first tested the concept in a health-care system near Pittsburgh, eager to see whether patients would even interact with a touch-screen system. They got what they considered encouraging

results: 40 percent participation from a population that was 100 percent Medicaid-eligible and considered technology-averse.

Word of the test reached Rick Shannon, chairman of the department of medicine at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine and the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. He acknowledged being skeptical.

"The idea of technology of this kind solving problems isn't always the way traditional doctors think," Shannon said in an interview last week.

Yet Wellby was given a 45-day tryout more than a year ago at a University of Pennsylvania Health System general-medicine practice in West Philadelphia. Shannon said he quickly became "a believer."

A total of 1,923 surveys were completed from 3,850 office visits, for a 50 percent response rate. The average time to complete a survey was three minutes, according to a report published in July in the American Journal of Managed Care.

Among the findings: Patients being treated for diabetes, chronic low-back pain, and asthma were more likely to set personal goals with their provider to manage their conditions than were those with depression. Less than half the patients reported receiving educational material from their doctors.

The ability to get instant feedback on a patient's impression of a clinical experience, Shannon said, is "certainly a much better system than mailing out questionnaires and getting responses three or four months after the fact."

That paper-dependent process is something most doctors' offices don't even have the time, staffing, and finances to sustain, said Kim Kuhar, whose internal-medicine practice in Silverdale, Bucks County, has been a test site for Wellby for the last year.

Even when her free subscription ends and Kuhar has to pay the \$1,500 monthly rate to use Wellby, it will be worth keeping, she said. Besides helping ensure a better outcome for her patients, Kuhar considers Wellby an effective tool for higher reimbursements from insurance companies. The data collected from it are the type of quality-outcome documentation that insurance companies are increasingly requiring, she said.

Sustained so far with \$3.5 million from its founders and a group of local angel investors, CarePartners and its workforce of 10 employees is in the process of installing the first 50 fee-based Wellby units.

Wellby's broadest exposure yet will come this week.

From Monday through Friday, it will be demonstrated at the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society symposium in Las Vegas, at International Business Machines Corp.'s booth. The technology powerhouse is manufacturing Wellby and has entered into a partnership with CarePartners to install and maintain the units.

"There's nothing like this today," said Dan Pelino, IBM's general manager of global health-care and life-sciences business.

Minniti said she was confident the IBM partnership would help CarePartners reach its goal of getting Wellby in 250,000 U.S. primary-care offices within five years, and establish an international presence for the system.

In June, she said, CarePartners plans to start rolling out enhancements to allow patients, through technology, to monitor and manage their health care from home.

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Teaching Patients to Actively Engage in Self-Care



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