

## **MHINT to link health providers; Patient data to be supplied by online system in Maine**

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It's coming sooner than you think. In just another year or so, hospitals and doctor's offices in selected regions of Maine will be linked to a shared electronic bank of health care information, allowing them to access critical information about their patients and provide better care. By 2010, the online data bank will be available to virtually all health care providers in the state.

Key information compiled in the Maine Health Information Network Technology system, or MHINT, is likely to include a patient's current medications, allergies, chronic conditions, recent laboratory tests, diagnostic studies and other information crucial to making sound and efficient patient care decisions.

"This is one of the most significant statewide health care initiatives in memory," said James Harnar, a health data specialist and consultant on the MHINT project. "It will ultimately affect every aspect of health care in Maine."

The project, which has been overseen by private and public entities, has been in the planning stages for a year and a half, and is expected to debut in regional trials in 2007. By the end of the decade, Harnar said, designers anticipate the system will be in widespread use statewide.

"The idea is to make the system available and affordable to as many health care providers as possible," he said Wednesday. MHINT will reduce medical errors, slow health care cost increases and improve the quality of care for all patients in Maine, he said.

Data from the system, stripped of any personal identifying information, may also be used by state health officials to track disease outbreaks and gather statistical information about how medicine is practiced in Maine, he said.

Eventually, Maine's network will be linked to a national system, and ultimately to an international system, Harnar said. "So if you get sick while you're on vacation in Cancun, the doctor who treats you there can find the information he needs from your doctor's office in Veazie," he said.

Established as a nonprofit organization, MHINT has a recently named board of directors that includes public and private sector members as well as consumer representatives.

The statewide computer system is expected to cost an estimated \$20 million to build and \$1 million a year to operate. State and federal funds, foundation grants, participating institutions and other sources will be tapped for financial support.

Dr. Wendy Wolf, president of the Maine Health Access Foundation, said Wednesday that her organization has been "a real champion" of the MHINT project from the beginning, convening planners and providing early funding for the planning stage. Created with the proceeds from the 1999 sale of Maine's nonprofit Blue Cross and Blue Shield program, MeHAF is charged with improving access to health care for all Mainers, with a special focus on the uninsured and underinsured.

Wolf said physicians in hospital emergency departments and other settings often treat patients without having any medical information about them. As a result, unnecessary tests and procedures may be performed and sometimes patient care suffers.

Providing doctors with the information they need to treat unfamiliar patients is "the right thing for Maine," Wolf said. For transient populations such as the homeless or others without a

primary care physician, she said, MHINT will establish a basic medical record that can be accessed "wherever they show up for treatment."

Wolf said public anxiety about having personal health care information available in a shared electronic file must be acknowledged and responded to. "People are afraid that employers or insurers could use this information against them," she said.

Privacy and security of the personal information on MHINT are major concerns of both the Maine Civil Liberties Union and the public advocacy group Consumers for Affordable Health Care. Both groups were invited to the MHINT table and have been active during the planning stages of the new system.

Shenna Bellows, executive director of the MCLU, said Wednesday that issues of privacy and the potential abuse of sensitive medical information are key issues for her organization. In addition to designing a high-security system, she said, MHINT planners should require patients to "opt in" to the system by specifically agreeing to have their information included on the database.

At CAHC, policy director Hilary Schneider agreed that consumers need to be assured the system is well designed to prevent information from getting into the wrong hands. Equally important, she said, they need to know they have legal protections in the event the information is abused. "[MHINT designers] could set up every protection in the world, and say they're not sharing the information with anyone," she said. "But there are always breakdowns."

Planning for the new system has been guided by Maine's four regional hospital systems: Eastern Maine Healthcare Systems in Brewer, Central Maine Healthcare in Lewiston, MaineHealth in Portland and MaineGeneral Health in Augusta. These organizations are all in the process of designing their own internal electronic medical records systems and will help fund MHINT, which will allow them to share patient information.

Other planners and funders include Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Maine, the Maine Quality Forum, the Maine Center for Diseases Control and Prevention, and the Maine Health Information Center.