

Very interesting article on EMR

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GO into almost any medical office, hospital or clinic in the United States and your records will still be handled the old-fashioned way ? on paper. You can use a computer to pay your taxes, to program your TiVo or to read a message from your great-aunt, but your doctor has to practically level a forest just to examine your medical files. The cost, however, isn't calculated in trees but in human lives: Electronic medical records would reduce the risk of medical errors and spare hospitals the expense of missing records and unnecessary treatment.

Health care providers have been dreaming about electronic records for so long that the idea has begun to seem like vaporware, a never-to-be-realized fantasy similar to flying cars and jetpacks. But there is already a clear software standard, an open-source system that's low-cost, easy to use and readily available. It could be the key to the health care system we ought to have already.

The program, WorldVistA, is based on the Veterans Affairs Department's electronic-records system, called VistA (short for Veterans Health Information Systems and Technology Architecture ? and yes, they beat Bill Gates to the name). VistA stands as perhaps the greatest success story for government-developed information technology since the Internet itself.

Using the VistA record system, the veterans department has managed to improve nearly every benchmark of quality in health care. In a decade, the department increased its pneumonia vaccination rate among at-risk patients to 94 percent from only 29 percent. That translates into 6,000 saved lives and \$40 million saved each year from fewer pneumonia hospitalizations. On a host of other benchmarks ? beta blocker use, cancer screening, cholesterol screening and so on ? the department outperforms the nation's best care.

Thanks to VistA, costs per patient at the Veterans Health Administration system are 32 percent lower, using inflation-adjusted dollars, than they were a decade ago. Over the same period, the medical consumer price index has increased 50 percent for the country as a

whole.

The patients are happy, too. For the past eight years, the Veterans Health Administration has outscored private-sector health care in the independent American Customer Satisfaction Index. And because VistA is government-developed software, we all own it ? it's in the public domain. But while the government will mail you a copy, it won't help install it or maintain it. The Department of Veterans Affairs is, in fact, prohibited by law to stray from its mission to serve veterans.

So in 2002, a group of former Veterans Affairs programmers and open-source advocates formed WorldVistA. They set about making a version of VistA that was simple for health care providers to use, and the fruit of their effort is now ready for market. Like VistA, WorldVistA is robust and fast. In April, the software was approved by the Certification Commission for Healthcare Information Technology. The certification means that WorldVistA is ready for broad adoption.

The effort to promote WorldVistA is supported by a grant from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the agency that sets the prices for Medicare and Medicaid payments. The agency wants to provide clinics and public hospitals, especially those that serve uninsured and underserved patients, with an inexpensive system for electronic medical records. The agency was also just getting tired of seeing another year go by without a significant increase in the adoption of digital records. Right now, only a quarter of office-based doctors use them.

The problem isn't a lack of software. There are hundreds of companies hawking electronic-records systems. But they don't come cheap. The average cost is about \$33,000 per doctor, plus another \$1,500 a month per doctor for maintenance, according to a study published in the policy journal *Health Affairs*. For a small clinic with one or two doctors, that price is usually out of reach. For major hospitals, installing a new system can quickly become a multimillion-dollar experiment.

WorldVistA, thanks to its public-domain origins, costs about one-tenth of what a proprietary system does for a license fee and a support contract. And like any good open-source project, it's constantly improving. A community of programmers fixes glitches and adds features, just as is done for the open-source Firefox browser and the Linux operating system.

And WorldVistA can be scaled up or down. It can work for neighborhood clinics, small-town hospitals, hospital systems, or, well, the Department of Veterans Affairs. WorldVistA's big promise is that it can become the nationwide standard for electronic medical records, the backbone of a national network of health care. Your medical records could be read instantly and understood (perhaps less instantly) by any provider, anywhere.

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Want to see the best knee surgeon in the country? If he's using WorldVista, he can check out your online records at his house or office. If you switch jobs and move to a new insurance plan, you won't need to build a new medical history and FedEx old records around. With your permission, your files will be accessible to your new providers instantly. In this way, electronic medical records generate better care and lower costs.

WorldVista isn't perfect. It isn't as customizable as some proprietary systems, and its graphical interface isn't as intuitive or as polished. Worse, its back-office functions — staffing and billing — aren't all that strong. Major hospitals and health maintenance organizations in search of a Cadillac are free to spend the dollars to buy one.

But for the vast majority of health care providers, WorldVista is what they've been waiting for: a low-cost, simple-to-use system that makes it easier to provide quality health care. If only it could upgrade the waiting-room magazines, too.

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