



Posted on Wed, Jun. 17, 2009

S.C. seeks 'road map' to move toward electronic medical records

Officials to talk today about health care information technology

By NOELLE PHILLIPS
nophillips@thestate.com

The federal government will spend billions over the next few years to push the country toward electronic health records.

Today, those who will help make that happen in South Carolina are gathering for the state's first health care information technology summit. Their goal is to develop a plan for applying for the stimulus money, said Emma Forkner, director of the S.C. Department of Health and Human Services.

They also want to spread information about what already is available for doctors, hospitals, pharmacies and other health care providers, said Jay Moskowitz, president of Health Services South Carolina.

"We want one united group to meet the needs of everyone," he said. "Every man, woman and child would have electronic medical records."

The Obama administration is leading the push for electronic medical records. On Monday, the president told the American Medical Association that FedEx does a better job tracking packages than the country does tracking patients' health records.

"You shouldn't have to tell every new doctor you see about your medical history or what prescriptions you're taking. You shouldn't have to repeat costly tests," he said. "All that information should be stored securely in a private medical record so that your information can be tracked from one doctor to another — even if you change jobs, even if you move, even if you have to see a number of different specialists."

In South Carolina, several agencies are working on the infrastructure to support electronic medical records, Forkner said. But, the state needs an overall plan for fitting the pieces together, she said.

"We have to figure out how to get everybody on the same page," she said.

That includes hospitals, doctors, insurance companies and government agencies that oversee public health programs.

In the federal stimulus program, money will be available to help doctors who serve Medicaid patients to offset the costs of installing updated medical records systems, Forkner said.

Money also will be available for universities to teach students how to use these programs, she said.

The stimulus package also will provide grants to states that want to set up loan programs for physicians who are buying new information systems, said Meredith Taylor, director of Congressional Affairs for the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society.

These grants will not be available until late 2010 and 2011, Taylor said.

South Carolina is ahead in developing the computer networks that can pass along information, said David Patterson, chief of health and demographics at the S.C. Office of Research and Statistics. His office runs the South Carolina Health Information Exchange, where doctors, hospitals, pharmacies and other providers can access records for more than 50,000 patients.

Part of today's meeting will involve people such as Patterson explaining what is already happening in the state.

"The idea is to get us moving toward something that resembles a road map for the state," he said.

Reach Phillips at (803) 771-8307.