

UnitedHealth unveils patient info service for MDs

TOM MURPHY - AP Business Writer - Associated Press

UnitedHealth Group's Optum business is launching a service that allows doctors to share information about patients over the Internet, as health care companies continue their push to improve care with better coordination.

The system, known as cloud computing, involves storing information and software applications on remote servers that are accessed through a secure Internet connection.

In health care, this means a doctor does not have to go to a particular computer for patient information or care updates. He or she can use portable devices like smart phones or tablet computers.

Optum's cloud provides a platform that health care providers can use for software that helps them track patients. For instance, a doctor can use cloud-based applications, or apps, to receive automatic updates on a hospitalized patient's condition or to be notified when a patient visits an emergency room or fails to fill prescriptions, a company spokesman said.

Currently, most doctors have to rely on patients to tell them when they visit another physician or the ER.

Cloud computing also can allow doctors to share patient records and discuss a case more efficiently.

Optum worked with Cisco, IBM and Hewlett-Packard Co. among others, to design the cloud and is launching a set of apps called Optum Care Suite to help providers use it. But it also is encouraging providers to design their own applications for the cloud as well.

UnitedHealth Group Inc., based in Minnetonka, Minn., is the largest U.S. health insurer. Its Optum business provides technology outsourcing, among other services.

Insurers and care providers have been more intent on improving care coordination. Last month, another insurer, WellPoint Inc., said it will boost primary care reimbursement by paying for care management it doesn't currently cover.

Some care providers also are forming accountable care organizations that coordinate care among doctors, specialists and hospitals.

Cloud computing platforms first started appearing in health care a few years ago, said Lisa Gallagher, senior director of privacy and security for the industry group Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society, or HIMSS. She said about 30 percent of health care providers like hospitals or physician practices now use

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some form of cloud computing.

Experts say care coordination leads to better care for patients. It helps doctors catch prescriptions that may conflict or cause a bad reaction. It also cuts down on test duplications and can help people remember when to see the doctor or refill their prescriptions.

It also can lower costs by cutting wasteful spending.

Care coordination currently is left mostly to the patient or his or her family, said Dr. Ann O'Malley, a researcher with the Center for Studying Health System Change. She said that's a task best left to primary-care doctors.

"Right now, coordination is horrible in this country for the most part," she said.

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