

Health Plan system tracks records, insurance claims of ER patients

Source: Detroit Free Press | June 16, 2009

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Jun. 16, 2009 (McClatchy-Tribune Regional News delivered by Newstex) -- The national drive to reduce health costs has come to the emergency department.

Health Plan of Michigan, Michigan's second-largest Medicaid provider, with 190,000 members, is to announce today that it has installed a new computer system at four hospitals its members use heavily that lets emergency department staff quickly gain access to a person's medical record and insurance claims data.

The Vital Data Technology system is the first of its kind in Michigan and points the way to changes likely to come with new federal funds for technology innovations in health care.

The insurance claims information makes the system more comprehensive than those used by most hospitals and health systems. It provides emergency department staff with an immediate summary of a person's medicines, doctor visits, tests, hospital admissions and other vital information.

It also sends immediate alerts to a health plan when a member seeks emergency department care, either to ensure the right follow-up care is provided or to recommend ways to manage a person's chronic health problems.

And the system provides a way to monitor people who rely heavily on emergency departments for care, which contributes to high costs.

"Certain patients do overuse the ER," said Dr. David Cotton, CEO of Health Plan of Michigan, based in Southfield.

The insurer's highest user of emergency care went to the hospital 92 times in a single year, Cotton said.

Patients may prefer ER care because they lack transportation, don't make advance appointments or like the fact that many ERs are affiliated with teaching hospitals with highly trained staffs, Cotton said.

Matt D'Ambrosia, CEO and president of Vital Data Technology, said Medicaid patients use emergency departments four times as much as people with commercial insurance.

The systems are in place or will be installed today at St. Mary's of Michigan hospitals in Standish and Saginaw; and two Lakeland Regional Medical Center hospitals in St. Joseph and Niles. Soon to go live is Mercy Memorial hospital, Monroe.

"We hope this catches on with different insurers," said Shane Hunt, manager of the emergency department at St. Mary's of Michigan, Saginaw. "It has a huge potential to make a difference. This is a real tool that ERs will find useful, practical and easy."