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St. Mary's emergency room in Saginaw takes next step in digital records

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The emergency room at St. Mary's of Michigan in Saginaw is tapping an insurance provider's digital records to help physicians get a better picture of their patients' health backgrounds.

The program, one of the first of its kind in the state, is only for members of Health Plan of Michigan, the state's second-largest Medicaid provider.

"The No. 1 goal is patient safety. It gives us insight into your past medical history," said Shane Hunt, manager of the emergency department at St. Mary's, 800 S. Washington.

Many emergency room patients are unable to provide detailed medical backgrounds when they arrive for treatment. But insurance data from Health Plan will list medications, recent surgeries and more, Hunt said.

The program may be a harbinger of federal plans to greatly expand computerized medical records in an effort to improve care and reduce costs. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act earmarks \$19 billion to help create such systems.

St. Mary's undertook the Health Plan program on its own initiative. The program operates at St. Mary's in Saginaw, but not at its other locations, which includes St. Mary's of Michigan in Standish.

Hunt said the insurance database can reduce costs by giving doctors more information to plan treatment options and more continuity in treating patients. That ultimately can reduce the need for future emergency room visits, Hunt said.

St. Mary's of Michigan in Saginaw sees more than 50,000 emergency room cases each year, although only a fraction are insured through Health Plan, he said.

Hunt said he hopes other insurance providers consider joining the MyVitalData program, which operates through a firm called Vital Data Technology.

Beyond Health Plan records, Hunt said virtually all emergency room paperwork at St. Mary's will be computerized by November.

The emergency room at Saginaw's Covenant Medical Center already operates almost entirely on computer, although its database does not extend beyond its own medical system or information scanned in from other facilities, said Dr. Brian Purchase, medical director of the emergency care center.

He feels Covenant is prepared if the federal government moves forward with plans for a larger medical records system.

Bay Regional Medical Center in Bay County also is moving toward a fully electronic records system in its emergency department, though it still does some of its record keeping on paper, spokesman Kurt Miller said.