

Special Audio Report Transcript

Headline: Recently Launched Federal Health Care Websites
Tap Private-Sector Best Practices

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TEXT:

I'm Kelly Wilkinson with an update on several federal health care websites that recently have been launched -- using best practices from the private industry to disseminate health information. This is a special report for iHeathBeat, a daily news service from the California HealthCare Foundation.

Federal health care websites aren't known for being sleek or particularly user-friendly ... but that's changing. HHS recently launched several major sites like vaccines.gov and healthcare.gov that are much more dynamic and consumer-friendly.

(Stapleton): "They represent a new approach to presenting information for the public on the part of the federal government."

Dick Stapleton is deputy director of the Web Communications Division at HHS. He says in the past HHS websites have reflected the bureaucracy of the federal government.

(Stapleton): "The public comes in to try and find information on something, they Google in, and Google finds you know bits and pieces of information on 20 different website. It's not very helpful."

Stapleton says the new approach reflects best practices from private industry sites, which include accessible websites where educational information is all in one place.

(Stapleton): "We go to supermarkets today because all of the food is in one place. We don't typically now drive all over the town or all over the countryside and multiple markets to get milk in one place and vegetables in another and eggs across town. So people shouldn't have to do that on websites."

HHS' Vaccines.gov pulls information from various HHS divisions to include information on how vaccinations work, as well as requirements for children's and travel vaccines.

The creation of Healthcare.gov was mandated by the health care reform law. Users plug in information such as their age, Zip code and ability to afford insurance. The site then creates personalized coverage options, pulled from private and public programs.

HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius unveiled the site in a Web video that walks users through the process of finding tailored insurance plans.

(Sebelius): "Then you select your state, followed up the category that best describes you. From there, continue to answer each question that best fits your own personal situation. "

Another new site is CMS' Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services Innovation. The center also was mandated by the health care reform law, and its website will serve as a warehouse to evaluate different care and payment models for Medicare, Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program.

Kathryn McDonald is executive director of the Center for Health Policy/Center for Primary Care and Outcomes Research at Stanford University. She says all the new HHS sites are tailored to different users.

(McDonald): "So it's pretty easy to sort of focus in on if you're a patient or family or clinician or professional or researcher -- you know where you should go. So they seem to be layering the information and allowing navigation that seems to me to be a lot more facile."

McDonald says transparency and accountability are big words within health care. And these sites reflect that.

(McDonald): "You know the users are consumers -- people actually trying to make choices about where they would go get their health care. And, having that information be difficult to find would be a frustration and would be something that would cause people to not see value in their government. And, I think our government wants its citizenry to see value in what they're providing at this stage, and the technologies have made it more feasible."

Those technologies have been in use for a while on private-sector websites like MayoClinic.com.

Roger Harms is the medical editor-in-chief there.

(Harms): "Our goal is to try to empower people to manage their health, and in order to do that, you have to know what people need to manage their health. And, the only way to really find that out is to ask them."

Harms says Mayo Clinic's staff and designers use focus groups to learn the best way to navigate health information. He says that research offered a revelation in how health information is disseminated -- because patients often want to start research with symptoms, while doctors might organize health-related information differently.

(Harms): "Doctors might have a tendency to structure things around the pathology of the disease, and what's going wrong patho-physiologically and then start to address the symptoms after that. So even though we may put our story together that way professionally, we recognize we needed to adjust the true content into the structure that the patients want to read it."

HHS followed Mayo Clinic's lead and conducted its own focus groups before launching its new sites. In addition, the agency implemented testing as part of its website development process. Stapleton says the agency has two usability labs, so designers build what they think is a logical website ... and then they put it in front of people to see if it makes sense. Stapleton says the sites then get tweaked until they work.

(Stapleton): "My goal is to get people in, get 'em what they need, and get 'em out."

This has been a special report for iHealthBeat, a daily news service from the California HealthCare Foundation. If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at I-H-B at C-H-C-F dot org. I'm Kelly Wilkinson, thanks for listening.