

Special Audio Report Transcript

Headline: Efforts to Improve Consumer Access to Electronic Health Records Are Taking Off

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Now that a critical mass of providers have health IT systems up and running, regulators and health care systems alike are looking at the best ways to engage consumers with their electronic health records. This is a special report for *iHealthBeat*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. I'm Rachel Dornhelm.

(Adams/Cronbach): "Hi, how are you doing? Good how are you. [FADE UNDER] Nice to see you."

Obstetrician-gynecologist Emily Cronbach [krone-bock] is greeting patient Lisa Adams in an exam room in Walnut Creek, Calif.

(Cronbach): "So we're mainly doing your routine exam today and your cervical cancer screening."

Cronbach is a Kaiser Permanente doctor and as part of her routine, she tells Adams how to access her latest health information online.

(Cronbach): "Yeah, you'll get your PAP results typically about two weeks after this appointment so you'll get an email saying you have lab results and you log into kp.org and see the results."

Adams says she has been using the online portal for years. She says the ability to email with her doctors there is initially what attracted her to the service. Now she is a fan of the online health records on the site. Adams says a few years ago she had a series of miscarriages.

(Adams): "And as a scientist I needed, I wanted to really understand what was going on with my body and so, the system afforded me that. I was able to go in and look at my test results. Graph them from what they were to the present, see any trends and just coordinate with the doctor."

Cronbach says that 70% to 80% of Kaiser patients in her service area are using the online system. She says it allows patients to review instructions from their appointment and better absorb detailed medical information and test results.

(Cronbach): "And they have the chance to read it when they can pay attention and get more out of it than from telephone conversation."

According to government estimates, about half of providers are now online. But only 9% to 12% of the overall population is looking at their health data that way. Patient advocate Patricia Knight, founder of Pacific Coast Health Advocacy, says despite patient rights, some offices still make it difficult to access records, digital or otherwise.

(Knight): "There is still some, I believe, lingering belief that you really can't understand everything. They're kind of protective of the record. They tend to put themselves between you and your record."

Changing attitudes is just one of the charges of the Office of Consumer eHealth at the Office of the National coordinator for Health IT. Lygeia [lie-GEE-uh] Ricciardi [ri-CHARD-ee] is the acting director.

(Ricciardi): "We often talk about these three prongs of change that are needed as the three 'A's'. The first 'A' being access to information. The second 'A' being action -- making information actionable through tools and apps. And the third 'A' being attitudes and changing attitudes. And that has to do with awareness too. So knowing you can ask for your information and feeling comfortable doing so."

Ricciardi says progress in all three areas is needed for widespread change. She expects to see that in the next few years, thanks to Stage 2 of the meaningful Use program.

(Ricciardi): "There are requirements built into that that providers enable patients to be able to view, download and transmit their health data electronically, and that's really a big deal."

Ricciardi says her office is working to increase patient awareness through educational videos and social media campaigns. The office has also launched a Pledge Program. So far, about 400 technology developers and providers have signed on, pledging to move consumer access forward. In addition, the office has also identified some consumer populations on which to focus initial efforts, including family caregivers, Ricciardi says.

(Ricciardi): "Mothers who are kind of what's in sometimes called the 'sandwich generation.' People who are taking care of children as well as a spouse, as well as often aging parents or other relatives. That's one group to whom this really appeals."

Ricciardi says engaging with digital health records is also appealing to people with chronic conditions who tend to think more about their health.

There are those who still have concerns about the shift to digital. Linda Garvin, founder of Patient Advocate Bay Area, says there can be overwhelming amounts of information in digital files, and it's not always complete.

(Garvin): "One of the problems that happens with digital records is that they're not always accurate and they're not always up to date."

But Ricciardi says by easing access, patients will be able to engage more with the data in their records. The overall effect should create more of a partnership with providers.

(Ricciardi): What we'd like to see is enabling people to move towards that kind of sharing collaborative relationship, if that's what they're interested in. Because that can yield some of the best health outcomes.

Ricciardi estimates consumers could have widespread access to their electronic health records within five years.

This has been a special report for *iHealthBeat*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at iHB@CHCF.org. I'm Rachel Dornhelm, thanks for listening.