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Medical records network planned for N.Y.

■ Online system will guide care providers and inform patients.

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The 10-county Rochester area is a leader in the state when it comes to sharing patients' medical records electronically across different places where care or testing is provided — such as hospitals, labs, imaging facilities and doctors' offices.



Kremer

The record-sharing network has been created by the Rochester Regional Health Information Organization, or RHIO, granted nearly \$24 million so far. The money has connected different medical computer record systems and paid for some private practices and clinics to switch from paper to digital patient records.

But what if you're in a car crash 150 miles away, on a drive to Albany?

The New York state Department of Health and a public-private

Records

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partnership called New York eHealth Collaborative, or NYeC (pronounced "nice"), recently announced plans to spend \$129 million in state and federal money to create a statewide network for electronic medical records, to be complete in 2014. Like the highways, they envision the network as a public utility that will allow medical providers anywhere in the state to view — with your permission — a list of your medications, any allergies and any recent X-rays or other tests that could help guide your care. The e-records network would be the largest in the country, dwarfing networks of other states and the Veterans Administration.

The planned statewide network, called Statewide Health Information Network for New York or SHIN-NY, is intended to serve more than 200 hospitals, thousands of medical practitioners and up to 20 million patients a year.

"We're looking at ways to assist NYeC so they don't have to reinvent the wheel," said Ted Kremer, Rochester RHIO executive director.

David Whitlinger, executive director of NYeC, said details are still being worked out. Currently medical office folks have to manually match up name, date of birth and Zip code to make sure they pull the records for the right John Smith, for

example. Eventually a single identifier for each person and for each clinician could reduce administrative costs and improve safety, Whitlinger said.

The Rochester RHIO uses secure online connections to link all 15 hospitals in this region, along with lab networks, health-insurance companies and other data providers. More than 360,000 patients in this region have signed consent forms so far to allow their doctor's offices to see their records through secure Internet connections. The Rochester RHIO has gone beyond the obvious parts of the health care system to include records from elder care agencies. Doctors and hospital discharge workers can see whether patients have been getting meals at home from Meals on Wheels, elder care case management or other non-medical, county-funded services from 50 area elder care agencies.

This year is push time for doctors' offices and others nationwide to switch from paper to digital records and to use their electronic records well. The federal government in 2011 will begin providing bonus Medicare and Medicaid payments to doctors who see a significant number of patients covered by those public insurance plans and who have met "meaningful use" guidelines for electronic medical records. The incentive payments are available each of the next five years, totaling up to \$65,000. The

amounts drop if medical offices delay going digital. After five years, those not using e-records in meaningful ways face financial penalties.

Large health institutions are more likely to have electronic record-keeping. But some smaller practices and those in more rural areas have questioned the cost and practicality of replacing paper records.

Bryan D. Hetherington of Empire Justice Center, a consumer advocate who's vice chairman of the Rochester RHIO board, said he's glad that funding has gone to local clinics that serve lower-income people, such as Anthony Jordan Health Center, so they aren't left out of the digital revolution in patient medical records.

A next step for the Rochester RHIO will be providing patients more access to their own records, so patients could look at the trend with their cholesterol readings or other test results, for example. Dr. Thomas Mahoney, associate executive director of the Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency, a health system planning group in the Rochester area, said patient portals could help patients because people are more likely to make changes to improve their own health when they feel they have more control. Data from the RHIO could eventually feed into a personal health record that a patient could look up online and add to. □

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