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Bush talks technology during stop at Clinic

He pushes eventual end of paper-based records

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President Bush came to Cleveland on Thursday to make a pitch for information technology in health care, which he said will save lives and money.

During an appearance billed as a "conversation" at the InterContinental Hotel & Conference Center Cleveland, Bush talked about moving away from paper-based medical records. He said that, even though the medical field has ushered in advanced technology, it still hasn't caught up to other industries that use information technology to make their businesses more efficient.

"We've got fantastic new pharmaceuticals that help save lives, but we've got docs still writing records by hand," Bush said. The crowd of hundreds laughed when he added, "And most docs can't write very well anyway."

In his first trip of his second term, Bush spent three hours in the city where his father unveiled a health care reform plan in 1992 - not to mention the state that played a big role in his own re-election victory.

The hotel, on the Cleveland Clinic campus, also had a connection to his campaign, as Vice President Dick Cheney attended a fund-raiser there in November 2003. The organizers of that \$2,000-a-person reception included Dr. Floyd Loop, the Clinic's former chief executive; A. Malachi Mixon, chairman of the Clinic's board; and trustee members Umberto Fedeli and Norma Lerner.

At the hotel Thursday, Bush led a panel that included six people who have experience with electronic health records, which he wants most Americans to have within 10 years.

They were: Dr. C. Martin Harris, the Clinic's chief information officer; Dr. Robert Juhasz, a Clinic primary-care physician; Patricia McGinley, a Clinic patient; Dr. Jorge del Castillo, associate chief of emergency medicine at Evanston Northwestern Healthcare in Illinois; Barth Doroshuk, president and CEO of the Washington ENT Group; and Dr. David Brailer, national health information technology coordinator.

Brailer outlined four goals: to ensure that every physician is able to use electronic health records; make information available throughout the country through a "medical Internet"; allow patients to see their own health information; and modernize the way the government reports public-health information.

At one point, Bush interrupted Brailer to say that, if an Ohioan visiting Florida were to get in a car accident, an electronic medical record ideally would be instantly available to the

doctor in the emergency room.

Bush later interrupted Harris - who described the Clinic's electronic record system and tied it to patient safety, quality and efficiency - to raise the issue of patient privacy.

"I presume I'm like most Americans," Bush said. "I think my medical records should be private. I don't want people prying into them. I don't want people looking at them. I don't want people opening them up unless I say it's fine for you to do so."

Harris explained that electronic records remain confidential. He also noted, "When anyone logs on to the system, we know. We know who they are. We know where they are. We know what they were looking at. And we can keep logs of all that information so that we can confirm for our patients that their information is secure."

Community health centers, generic drugs and health savings accounts were other things Bush highlighted as ways to cut costs.

While Bush was warmly received inside the hotel, about a dozen protesters huddled outside, The Associated Press reported. And U.S. Rep. Stephanie Tubbs Jones, whose district includes neighborhoods around the Clinic, urged Bush to address issues related to the uninsured.

"The colossal failure of our health care delivery system is obvious with an increase among those in our community who cannot obtain affordable health care," she said in a statement. She noted the number of patients seeking care at the Free Clinic of Greater Cleveland is continuously on the rise.

Bush ended the hourlong discussion by saying, "What we're hearing today is just the beginning of substantial change, all aimed at improving people's lives."

He then shook hands with audience members and signed autographs - even on the sling cradling 11-year-old Jenna Ripepi's right arm. The North Royalton girl said it was her first time meeting the president.

After the event, Harris said that, once area hospitals fully develop their own electronic record systems, it will make sense to connect them with each other. This week, Edward Marx, chief information officer at the University Hospitals Health System, said he has had initial discussions on such a possibility with colleagues at MetroHealth Medical Center, the Stokes Cleveland VA Medical Center, the Clinic and Kaiser Permanente.

That kind of collaboration would be a big step toward Bush's goal of widespread adoption. In the budget he will soon send to Congress, the president will propose spending \$125 million on projects to test the effectiveness of health information technology.

Also Thursday, the Department of Health and Human Services proposed bringing electronic prescriptions to seniors when Medicare's prescription drug program begins in January 2006.

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