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by Robert Recker

Senior Editor

Cleveland - In his first return to the Buckeye State since Ohioans helped win him a second term, President George W. Bush and a team of local doctors on Thursday talked about strategies for helping make the health industry more efficient and less expensive.

Speaking at the Cleveland Clinic's main campus, the president set a goal for all prescriptions, doctors charts and other paper medical records to be switched over to digital data within 10 years.

"Most industries in America have used information technology to make their businesses more cost-effective, more efficient and more productive, but the truth is, health care hasn't," he said. "We have doctors still writing [patients'] records by hand."

Bush's six-person panel included several physicians whose offices had already made the switch, including Dr. C. Martin Harris, Cleveland Clinic chief information officer, who said his hospital system's 1,200 physicians and thousands of nurses use electronic records.

He said the Clinic filled 2 million prescriptions electronically last year, allowing a computer program to automatically check for potentially dangerous drug interactions.

The hospital's "MyChart" Web page allows patients to check laboratory test results, schedule appointments and refill prescriptions from their own homes, Harris added.

"The system runs the best when consumers are making their own decisions," Bush said.

Clinic patient and panel member Patricia McGinley told the crowd of several hundred she used the hospital's online database when her blood work came back with the surprising news that she had high cholesterol. Her next appointment was a nerve-wracking two weeks away, and the site offered information about the severity of her condition.

"I went from feeling helpless to being in total control," she said. "It made me feel like I was part of the decision-making process."

Dr. David Brailer - who Bush appointed to look into strategies for making the industry more efficient - said with electronic records databases, emergency room doctors could have almost instant access to patients' medical histories, allergies, prescription drug interactions and other vital information which now has to be called in or faxed between offices. He said the next step would be to develop a "medical Internet" to share electronic records with physicians across the country.

While Bush noted that many patients may worry about their personal information floating around in cyberspace, Harris said electronic records would actually be more secure than paper. Harris said there's no way to tell who has looked at paper records, but if forms are stored in an online database, patients could tell who had viewed their data and when, based on their account's log-in registers.

Besides the modernization of health records, Bush also touched on the need for high-deductible, tax-free health savings accounts instead of traditional private insurance plans, massive reform of doctors' liability law to curb "junk lawsuits," and updating Medicare coverage.

"Medicare pays \$100,000 for heart surgery, but doesn't pay a dime for the prescription that would make the surgery unnecessary," he said.

Bush said he would demand the Food and Drug Administration quicken the process for releasing generic, less expensive versions of prescription drugs to the market. He also promised to expand the "Community Health Center" program - which creates medical facilities for low-income patients - "to every poor county in the United States," so that poverty-stricken could get good health care all the time, "not just in the emergency room."

In opening the forum, the president introduced Mike Leavitt, who only 15 hours earlier was appointed secretary of the federal Department of Health and Human Services.

"It's a simple and direct formula," Leavitt said. "When people have access to their own health records ... there's a lower cost and fewer mistakes."

The president said the modernization of medical records "has to be implemented from the ground up, not from the top down."

"That's why we're here at the hospital talking about it," he said.

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