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President promotes medical technology at Cleveland Clinic

Cleveland Clinic visit touts electronic records

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CLEVELAND - It was one of those cryptic messages that physician's offices are famous for: Your blood tests have uncovered a problem; please make an appointment to see the doctor.

But it would be two weeks before Patty McGinley's doctor -- Dr. Bob Juhasz of the Cleveland Clinic's Willoughby Hills Family Health Center -- would be able to see her.

A phone call to the office revealed that her cholesterol was the problem. But how high was it? Was McGinley, as she put it, ``a little unhealthy or a lot?"

Seated next to President Bush at a forum at the Cleveland Clinic on Thursday, McGinley talked about her problem and its resolution.

``I'm a worrier," the 48-year-old Concord Township woman said. ``I felt pretty helpless and concerned."

Then she got an e-mail message from the Cleveland Clinic that included a link to her electronic medical records. In the message were not just her test results, but also charts that showed where her results fell in relation to normal ranges of cholesterol and triglycerides.

``I went from feeling helpless to being in complete control," she said. ``It really empowered me."

That's what Bush wanted to hear. And he hopes millions more Americans will be able to say the same thing in the coming decade, as the health-care industry embraces technology to become more efficient, bring down costs and deliver better, safer care.

``Information is a liberating tool," he told the invited crowd of doctors and medical professionals, adding that information technology ``can save money and save lives."

It was Bush's first trip of his second term, and for his post-inaugural visit, he chose Ohio, whose 20 electoral votes put him over the top on Election Day.

Bush plans a series of barnstorming trips to promote his domestic agenda. Many of those appearances will be in swing states that were critical in the 2004 race and will be battlegrounds in future elections.

Bush used Thursday's event to push other parts of his health-care platform: medical savings accounts, tort reform, getting generic drugs to the marketplace more quickly, and allowing small businesses in different states to band together to offer insurance to workers.

But the focus of the event was technology.

Bush's 10-year goal

Dr. David Brailer, Bush's national health information technology coordinator, said the goal in the next 10 years is to have every doctor use a computer to record and read patients' medical records, to order tests, to write prescriptions and to view images, such as X-rays or CT scans.

The real challenge, Brailer said, is creating connections between different -- sometimes rival -- hospitals, so that if people find themselves in an emergency room in a different city, their medical records will be readily available to doctors who have never seen the patient before.

That will improve safety, said Dr. Martin Harris, Cleveland Clinic's chief information officer.

``A patient will never have to worry about receiving the wrong dose or an inappropriate medication simply because someone couldn't read the handwriting on a piece of paper," Harris said.

Hospitals in Summit

Bush chose the Cleveland Clinic to push his technology message because of the wide range of its electronic medical records. But Akron hospitals are doing some of the same things.

Both Akron General Medical Center and Summa Health System have systems that allow doctors to view patients' charts electronically.

At Akron General, doctors are beginning to carry tablet-sized computers from room to room.

At Summa, doctors can check lab results and place prescription orders via a computer system that scans for allergies and drug

interactions. Summa doctors soon will be able to access X-rays, CT scans and MRIs via wireless computer.

Sue Heiser, director of health information management at Akron General, said the federal government's role in this needs to go beyond a presidential event. The federal government must establish a standardized system that all hospitals can follow, she said, and some government money needs to be behind it. ``These systems are not cheap," she said.

Money and privacy

In the budget Bush will send Congress next month, he will propose spending \$125 million to test computerization of health records. That's more than twice what is being spent in this budget year that ends Sept. 30.

Estimates of the national cost to equip hospitals with the necessary equipment have been as high as \$276 billion over 10 years. Estimates of savings vary widely, from \$24 billion to \$76 billion a year.

The issue of computerized medical records often leads to questions about privacy, but Harris, Cleveland Clinic's information officer, said technology will actually improve privacy.

``If you left a medical record on paper in a room, how will you know who saw it? You can't know," he said. ``When it's in electronic form, 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 keep a log of all that information."

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