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### Health care

# Coalition to examine medical records system

Washington Business Journal - May 19, 2006 by [Neil Adler](#) Staff Reporter

A local coalition wants to push the region's doctors beyond pen and paper.

The Maryland/D.C. Collaborative for Healthcare Information Technology is trying to create an electronic network that would link doctors and hospitals in Maryland and D.C., cut down on medical errors and give health care workers quicker access to patient information.

**The Annapolis-based group plans to use results of a feasibility study to secure at least \$5 million so it can develop a prototype of the network later this year or early 2007.**

The system would enable hospitals, doctors, insurers and other providers to transmit health data securely.

A completed version of the network would take three to five years to set up. It would cost tens of millions of dollars, which means the collaborative would need financial commitments from local providers and other sources to get the network running.

If the collaborative can stick to its timetable, the group would be ahead of the pack nationally. President Bush has ordered providers, over the next decade, to make sure each U.S. resident has an electronic medical record to cut down on the estimated 100,000 to 200,000 deaths caused each year by preventable medical errors. Several other states, such as Massachusetts and Rhode Island, are working on similar efforts.

The hurdles are considerable, however.

Implementing new health care technologies is expensive, and some hospitals aren't convinced that the electronic systems improve patient safety.

Persuading doctors and others to embrace computer-generated information when they've used paper for decades also is tricky.

"The challenges are not as much about technology," says Victor Plavner, chairman of the group ([www.collaborativeforhit.org](http://www.collaborativeforhit.org)), which was founded in 2001. "It's more political."

The coalition, whose members include Aetna, CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield and MedStar Health, will focus on Maryland and D.C. for now but would like to include Virginia down the road, Plavner says.

Once all local hospitals are involved -- the group currently represents about one-third of hospitals in Maryland and D.C. -- it will be much easier for them to communicate effectively.

"A lot of information is housed in silos in health care," says Mike Fierro, CareFirst's associate vice president of health care informatics. "This effort is meant to break those silos."

When strong protections are in place and the data exchange has proved its viability, providers throughout the region will be able to join the network, though it's not clear how much it would cost them.

"We think this will transform the way medicine is practiced in the mid-Atlantic region," Plavner says.

Others not involved in the coalition agree.

"With the ability to have hospitals, payers and providers connected via a secure network, this is one necessary measure that will assist in the efforts to reduce overall health care expenses," says Keith Lemer, a principal in the Bethesda office of WellNet Healthcare, a provider of medical and prescription-drug benefits.

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