On-line service reduces waiting room time (~19 col. in.)

by James Tyree/Norman (Okla.) Transcript

Additional Information:

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NORMAN, Okla. - Quick: what do people hate most about going to the doctor's office? Other than the probability of sickness or injury in the first place, most would say the long wait, filling out forms and rising costs.

Agi Lurtz joined the disenchanted a few years ago while caring for her late father through the last 10 years of his life.

"I often took off from work to take him to doctors and filled out those forms, three times a month," she said. "I would sit there for hours, thinking there has to be a better way of doing this."

Lurtz said the worst experience may have been a trip to Norman Regional Hospital, where she had to fill out lengthy forms three times for separate departments. Although most of the information overlapped, each department had to have its own form.

She spoke with hospital administrators about it and they have since addressed that problem. Still, Lurtz saw many other ways to streamline the doctor visit, so four years ago she and Mary Stephens laid the groundwork for what became a Web site that helps patients and doctors alike.

Onlinemedsource.org helps patients by listing physicians and medical centers with their addresses and telephone numbers, and the site offers much more. It also has a medical dictionary and information areas, online forms from participating physicians to save time at the doctor's office and a page to check on drug and herbal interactions.

"It's totally free," Lurtz said. "You can go there to find a doctor, look for a job in the medical field and find information on new clinical trials. There are medical links to other sites. We have researched the best sites that are reputable, including where to sign up for free and reduced drugs."

Lurtz owns and operates a Norman computer store. Stephens had worked a combined 25 years at a hospital and private doctor's office, so each brings vital expertise to the business. They also have three computer programmers who have built and updated the site.

Onlinemedsource.org has been up since late 2003 and nearly 20 medical practices have signed up from Norman to Nacogdoches, Texas. Stephens said other physicians and centers are in various stages of joining. Ultimately, Lurtz said, "we are creating something that will work for the entire United States and have server space for the whole country."

So someday, if an Oklahoman visits California and has a blackout, a health care worker would be able to go online and learn whether the patient is diabetic or epileptic. That knowledge could be lifesaving, Lurtz said of her example, because those conditions require different treatments.

Lurtz and Stephens are building their business by recruiting more practices to join and by working with federal and state government officials to enlarge their records retrieval capabilities while adhering to HIPPA privacy guidelines. They also are recruiting representatives in every state, ones with experience in working in doctors' offices.

Stephens said medical offices benefit from the Web site because it reduces their paperwork and gives them quick access to their patients' records from any computer.

"Basically, we take everything about a doctor's office and put it online," Lurtz said. On average, nearly 80 percent of participating doctors' patients use the system. Of patients who use the site, the show-up rate is 100 percent. Without the system, it's common to have no-show rates topping 40 percent, Lurtz said. There is only a five-minute waiting time for new patients.

For another time-saving feature, a patient's common information like name, address and telephone number self-populates to that person's other forms. Patient data, along with all e-mails and other information, is encrypted to ensure privacy. The cost for a doctor in solo practice is $1,495 for the first year and $695 for every year after that. Group practice rates are the same multiplied by the number of physicians.

"We want every health care provider to say yes and not say no because of money," Lurtz said. "This is very reasonable, and doctors can have their investment returned in only two months."

James S. Tyree writes for the Norman (Okla.) Transcript.