

Medicare PHR Test Launched in Two States

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Associate Editor

Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries living in Arizona and Utah are among the first to test-drive a pilot program that lets them access their personal health records online.

They also can add pertinent information such as their medications, preexisting conditions, and lab results, and electronically share them with their doctors, specialists, and family members.

In a teleconference held by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to announce the initiative, Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt emphasized that personal health records (PHRs) are not like electronic health records owned by health care providers. Instead, PHRs are completely under patients' control.

"PHRs can contain a wealth of information entered by patients, their providers, and in some cases their health plan. They can authorize additional users such as a family member or other care-

givers. Once a patient sets up a PHR, he or she can then add other information and ask Medicare to populate it with 2 years of previous claims data," Mr. Leavitt said.

This electronic information would be valuable to both patients and providers, he said. A patient "could have his or her life saved because an emergency room doctor has immediate knowledge of preexisting conditions or an allergy or current medication. Routine medical visits could be made more convenient, quicker, and efficient by reducing unnecessary paperwork and duplicate tests."

The goal of the initiative, known as the Medicare Personal Health Record Choice Pilot, is to give beneficiaries autonomy over their health care. CMS Acting Administrator Kerry Weems explained that people will have a choice of four service providers that will help them set up their free PHR online: GoogleHealth, Health-Trio, NoMoreClipboard, and PassportMD. The four companies were selected by an administrative contractor, Noridian Administrative Services, Fargo, N.D.

All four companies are "already out

functioning in the marketplace" and able to provide secure sites for downloading sensitive information. Functionality, ease of use, compliance with standards, accessibility to providers and family members, and an outreach component to draw Medicare participants to their sites and develop PHRs were among selection criteria, Mr. Weems said.

Mr. Weems said he was unsure how many people could be expected to sign

up for the pilot program but noted that the two states have a combined Medicare service population of about 1 million. The states also have a mix of rural and urban residents.

In addition to developing online PHRs, Medicare recently launched a nationwide program that will encourage doctors to enroll in e-prescribing services. Those who participate will receive financial incentives from Medicare, he said. ■

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