The Need For a Universal Patient Information Service
Made Possible by Recent Advances in Information Technology

By Francis M. Ardi

There has been a lot of debate and discussion about Socialized Medicine over the past few decades. It is a plan to make health care available to everybody, especially those who cannot afford health insurance.

It also offers another advantage.

Since socialized medicine is a program administered by the government, all health service providers are parts of a single entity - the Department of Health. In the United Kingdom, it is the National Health Service. Various departments of the health service can be linked together by a patient information system accessible by any provider in the nation's healthcare system.

After the fall of communism, it has become more politically correct to refer to socialized medicine as "universal health care". It more clearly defines the purpose of providing health care to all citizens of a nation regardless of an individual's economic position.

It's All About Universal Access to Patient Information

Not only does Universal Health Care assure uniform quality health care to all citizens of a nation, it also allows for better distribution of patient information all across the country and in all specialties. Easy access to patient information is paramount to efficient and effective health care delivery for all citizens.

In the United States, every health care service provider establishment seems to be its own entity. There are systems, but are usually limited to a city or metro area.

Some national pharmacy chains have their own nationwide prescription database.

When you go from one provider to another as a new patient, it's like starting over again. The doctor has to take a complete history and do a physical exam, a time-consuming task.

Then there is transfer of records, x-rays, EKGs, etc. This often requires a release form signed by the patient. A lot of trouble before the physician would have a clear picture of the patient's state of health.

With online information systems, it is possible to readily access an individual's health information from anywhere in the country or the world. The patient's Social Security number (U.S.A.) or full name and date of birth could be the access key. These can be found on a driver's license or government issued ID.

Even if a patient is brought in unconscious.

An emergency room far from home would be able to check your records about your current health problems. A physician can find out what medications the patient is taking to avoid a dangerous drug interaction.

Even when a patient is brought to the ER unconscious the physician would have access to background information on that person's health problems.

A doctor would already know the history of the patient before actually seeing the patient, having quickly read the data on each patient on the appointment list. Any talk would be about the patient's current condition. Doctors would spend less time with each patient and still offer full benefits of service.

More patients could be seen in a given day. This would make the best use of health care personnel and facilities.

Even Non-Textual Data like X-Rays and EKGs Can Be Stored and Retrieved

Among these are photographs, like that of your retina (optomap) and colonoscopy pictures.

There are also digital x-rays and electrocardio-grams (EKGs) which can be stored on a hard drive and attached to email messages. All these are accessible through the patient's database identifier. Dental x-rays would be available to any dentist a patient sees.

A doctor would want to look at past EKGs for comparison.

A doctor sees someone with chest pain and suspects a myocardial infarction. He orders an electrocardiogram. He might not see anything significant on the one just taken in the ER.

The doctor might then want to see a past EKG he can compare with. The patient's previous EKGs can be accessed from the database

A Centralized Data Base Would Also Be More Convenient for Patients

No longer would a patient going to a new doctor in a new city have to fill out a form listing all the chronic conditions and medications and past illnesses and surgeries because the doctor would have looked up this information before actually seeing the patient.

If you were ever a new patient at a doctor's office you know how lengthy and complex such forms can be.

A patient would not need to carry a list of prescriptions when traveling out of town in case she urgently needs to see a doctor.

Yes, having a nationwide patient health information system on the Internet would make providing care much more effective and efficient. It could also help doctors avoid errors and omissions.

Could the United States have such a system?

In a country with a national health service, this would simply be a matter of the government setting up a network of database servers connected to the Internet. Access would be restricted to licensed health care providers.

However in a country like the United States, where health care is a business, who would pay for and administer such a health care information system?

Would it be a business that would offer a subscription service to all health care providers and insurers?

Such a system would be expensive to set up and maintain. There would be a need for multiple locations containing the same databases in case a server stops working.

All data entered would be copied to all locations. Should one server fail, there would be no loss of data or function as far as clinics having access to patient information.

Makes for Best Use of Resources

Another cost-saving advantage of a universal database is that hospitals and medical offices need not have roomfuls of paperwork taking up expensive square footage of office space.

It will also save time in retrieving patient information, not to mention lots of paper.

In conclusion, regardless of the provider and delivery of health care, centralized online patient information accessibility would make providing patient care more efficient and cost effective, and in some cases even improve the probability of saving someone's life.