

FREE

in good Health

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Medical Society's New President

Syracuse needs to do a better job branding itself as a city that excels at treating certain diseases, says physician Ramsay S. Farah



Tired of the Same Old Exercise Regimen?

New ideas to make exercise fun



Paying It Forward

Judy Colvin, a physician who practices in Fayetteville, volunteers in Haiti

Refugee doctors find freedom, opportunity in Syracuse

Noise at Basketball Games May Harm Your Hearing

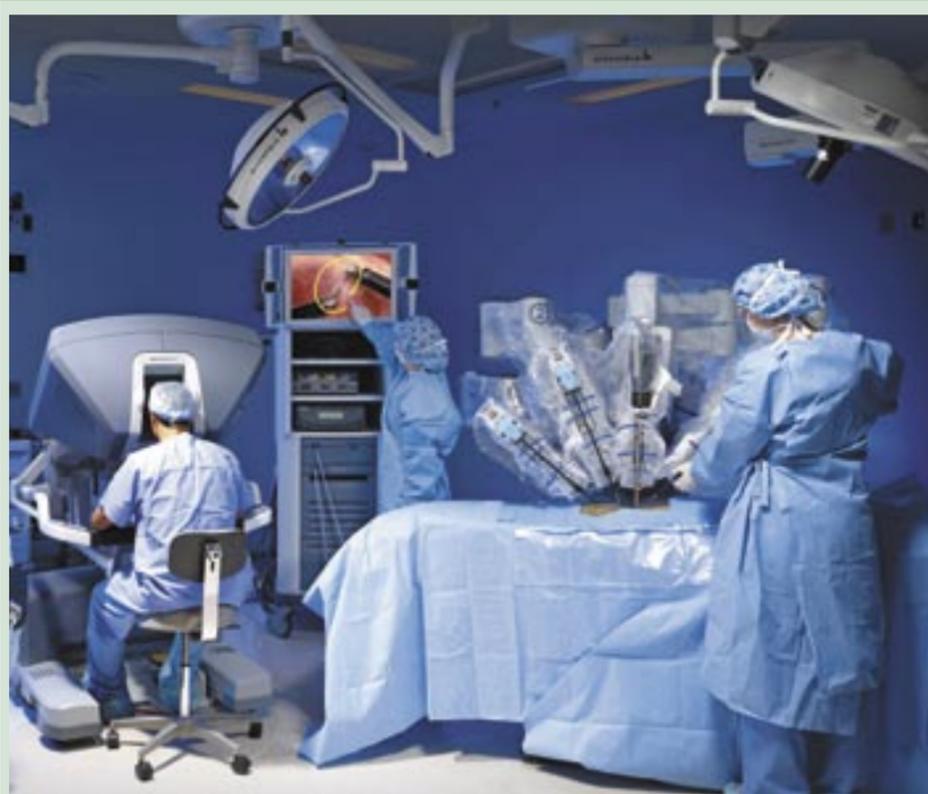


1,000,000

electronic medical records

HealthConnections has already secured patient electronic medical records for more than 1 million of the 1.4 million people who live in the region.

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Oneida Healthcare: Innovative Surgeries with da Vinci Robot

While the larger Syracuse hospitals have made Central New York a hot bed for robotic surgery, a smaller facility outside the metro area has become the first in the region to use the emerging technology for an innovative new procedure.

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No Kidding! You Can Have a Heart Attack While Shoveling

Beyond trouble with your heart, shoveling can also result in back muscular strain, lumbar disc injury, and shoulder or elbow strains. We spoke about safety with local experts.

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CNY: 1 Million Electronic Medical Records

One of the newly created RHIOs, HealtheConnections, serves 11 counties in Central, Southern and Northern New York

By Suzanne M. Ellis

The past few years have seen significant technological advances in the improvement of health care, including the nationwide creation of some 300 regional health care information organizations. RHIOs, as they are known, collect and electronically store medical information, insuring that critically important patient data will be available to hospitals, laboratories, physicians and other health-care professionals with the touch of a keyboard.

One of the newly created RHIOs, HealtheConnections, serves 11 counties in Central, Southern and Northern New York. Since being launched in late 2010, HealtheConnections has already secured patient records for more than 1 million of the 1.4 million people who live in those counties. It has also received consent from some 400,000 of those patients who wish to be included in the electronic medical database.

"The milestones we have reached are very significant," said Rob Hack, executive director of the nonprofit, community-run HealtheConnections, which has a staff of 12 at the State Tower Building in Syracuse. "Some RHIOs that have been in operation in New York state for five years or longer haven't yet reached that kind of milestone."

The counties included in the HealtheConnections RHIO network are Cayuga, Cortland, Herkimer, Jefferson,

Lewis, Madison, Oneida, Onondaga, Oswego, St. Lawrence and Tompkins. Statewide, there are currently 12 regional health information organizations. Nationally, the most recent estimate is 300, according to healtheconnections.org

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the concept for regional health databases was born in 2004 when then-President George Bush issued an executive order for the nationwide implementation of technological infrastructure to improve the efficiency of health care for Americans. The goal was for most Americans to have a comprehensive, electronic health record by the end of 2014.

HealtheConnections was created by the nonprofit Health Advancement Collaborative of Central New York (HAC-CNY), a group of health care, business and insurance professionals who got together in 2005 to address concerns about access to health care, its quality and costs. Founding members were the Greater Syracuse Chamber of Commerce, the Hospital Executive Council, the Manufacturers Association of CNY, the Metropolitan Development Association of Syracuse and CNY, the Onondaga Medical Society and Excellus BlueCross BlueShield. Other entities represented on the group's board of directors, according to healtheconnections.org, are C&S Engineers, MVP Health Care, Kinney Drugs, Syracuse University, Welch Allyn and Stickley Audi.

HealtheConnections became a reality thanks to \$900,000 in federal funds, \$2.1 million in New York State HEAL (Health Care Efficiency and Affordability Law) funds, and \$350,000 in corporate contributions from Excellus, MVP Health Care and National Grid. It is being sustained by health-insurance companies like Excellus, MVP, POMCO and EBS-RMSCO "and you and I, the consumers," said Rob Hack, who joined HealtheConnections in April of 2010.

At this point, most of the 19 hospitals in the region are participating in HealtheConnections, Hack said, and the staff is working with the remaining two hospitals in Oneida and Hamilton.

The participating laboratories, radiology centers, physician's offices and other medical facilities currently number 110.

"We have really just started our effort with the providers," he said. Part of the challenge is that about half the providers don't keep electronic records, but Medicare and Medicaid are pushing for everyone to move to electronic databases and away from paper record-keeping. "Our push for the past two years has been hospitals and large radiology and laboratory [facilities]," he said. "Our push over the next few years will be to get physician practices and small labs connected to the exchange."

In addition to the collection and storage of medical records, HealtheConnections also directs the movement of that information. When a laboratory sends a report, for example, they make sure the test results get to the proper providers.

"That helps with speed and drives efficiency," Hack said.

Once a person's medical data is collected by HealtheConnections, it can't be shared among medical professionals until that person gives his or her consent for the dissemination of information. Giving that consent, Hack said, isn't mandated, but it's something that can make a positive difference in a person's health care. Patients won't have the hassle of remembering the dates and other specifics of previous medical tests, prescriptions they previously took or the ones they currently use.

"The more information you have on a patient, the better the treatment will be for that patient," he said. "Take, for example, a person coming into the [emergency room] who can't explain what's going on or tell the doctors anything about his medical history. Having that information readily available can result in better care for a patient and less duplication of tests, which saves money. Once people understand what we do, they realize the benefits."

New York state policy allows hospitals, doctors' offices, laboratories and other medical entities to send records to a health information exchange without the patient's consent. But before the

records gathered by HealtheConnections can be viewed by medical providers, the patient must first give his or her consent, in writing, to each of their providers.

Addressing concerns over online safety, Hack said, "We have agreements with providers who share information with us, and those providers would never share that information with [us] unless it was being shared in a completely safe environment. The levels of security are extremely high, and before anybody can use the system they must have credentials and be trained in the privacy and security requirements that are in place."

Surprisingly, perhaps, the largest percentage of people — so far — who have given their consent are older patients.

"People who have a long and complicated health history support what we are doing," Hack said. "They understand that the more information that's available, the better their care will be."

Patients can't access their medical information online — that access is limited to medical professionals — but once they're in the system they can request a printed copy of their records from participating providers.

"We may, in time, launch a patient portal to make some of that available online, but that's a ways off," Hack said.

Nationally, some states are operating as single RHIOs and don't have regional systems, like HealtheConnections, that target smaller geographic areas.

"We believe health care is local and that the needs of patients are specific to a region," Hack said. "Because we are a more rural area, we have different needs. We have a lot more one- and two-doctor offices and a lot more smaller practices."

Consent forms are available from participating providers and the list of current participants is updated regularly at www.healtheconnections.org. Consent may be withdrawn at any time in the future. Additional information for medical professionals and patients is also available on the site.



Rob Hack is executive director of HealtheConnections Regional Health Information Organization, a nonprofit organization created in 2010. HealtheConnections is an electronic health information portal which provides authorized medical professionals with essential patient information including test results, lab reports, medication history and insurance eligibility. In just two years, it has obtained patient records for more than one million people in an 11-county region of Central and Northern New York.