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Employers promoting health technologies

If you've been longing for the day when you could receive your prescription via email, print it out from home or the office, and get it filled shortly thereafter, then hold tight - that day might soon be coming. Continua Health Alliance, a coalition that promotes interoperable personal health and medical devices, is gathering benefit managers from its member organizations to test e-health initiatives and create telehealth networks.

Continua's more than 60 members, including IBM, Baxter, Kaiser Permanente and Pfizer, represent nearly three million employees. The group, formed in June, promotes widespread use of innovative biomedical devices that have only been used in a limited capacity to this point. For example, Continua wants all individuals with diabetes or heart conditions to be able to transmit their vital signs, such as blood pressure, glucose levels, temperature, weight and respiration, seamlessly from home to their doctor and get real-time feedback on their condition.

"Continua is gathering the health managers at each of its member companies with the intention of using them as a test, or microcosm, to see which health care technologies could be most useful," Richard Zall, attorney with Proskauer Rose in New York, told attendees at the World Healthcare Innovation and Technology Congress yesterday in Washington, D.C. "I think we're going to see a lot of employer self-funded wellness programs."

Fortune 100 companies are examining ways to improve telehealth designs, particularly to limit employee absence due to chronic conditions, like diabetes and heart disease.

"Employers are very concerned about managing costs of care, particularly with chronic conditions," Zall observed. "We're saying, 'Get the employee these technologies to better manage chronic conditions,' and therefore help drive down health care costs."

Zall is confident that Continua will achieve its goal of increased use of telemedicine networks and telehealth technologies. "We've got companies now with digital health divisions with standardized ways to capture data that will allow for a lot more products and services, and better tools," he said.