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World Health Congress Report: Technologies Put Healthcare in the Hands of Patients

By Laura Bonetta

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Patients need to take more active control of their healthcare. This message was a recurring theme of presentations at The World Healthcare Innovation and Technology Congress, held from November 1-3 in Washington, D.C. Speaking on the last day of the three-day conference, David Lansky, Ph.D., executive director of the Personal Health Technology Initiative at the Markle Foundation, discussed the growing support for electronic personal health records. In theory these records, which come in many flavors, could make healthcare more efficient and safer.

A personal electronic health record provides a complete and accurate summary of the person's health and medical history, gathering information from many sources. Healthcare providers can then access this information, which would include allergies and adverse drug reactions, lists of prescribed medications (including dose and how often they are taken), details of illnesses, hospitalizations, surgeries, vaccinations, laboratory test results, and family history. Personal electronic health records also serve to remind patients to schedule tests, refill prescriptions, take medicines, and so on.

In a survey conducted by the Markle Foundation, 60 percent of the public is in favor of having some type of electronic health records, either maintained by the consumers themselves or by some type of provider (such as their employer, insurance company, medical practice, and so on). "Most patients view that it is important to have all the health information in one place" that is accessible to them, said Lansky. According to the survey, 69 percent of consumers want health records so they can check for potential errors, 68 percent to check and fill prescriptions, and 58 percent to get test results over the Internet.

Although people are in favor of health records, they do not want to have full control. "Most people view their doctor as the key point of contact for health," said Lansky. But with fewer than one in 10 doctors making full use of electronic health records, and as few as 5 percent of hospitals using one form of them, the U.S. healthcare industry is way behind in adopting electronic systems.

This may soon change. President George W. Bush has called on U.S. healthcare institutions to adopt electronic systems for a majority of patients by 2014 as a way to make healthcare delivery more efficient and more effective. "Such incentives mean that something will happen soon," said Lansky.

A number of other tools designed to put the burden of preventive healthcare on patients were discussed at the conference. One example is the personalized information platform (PIPS), a virtual healthcare assistant that can provide services from scanning barcodes of food items to check whether they are safe to eat to connecting to blood pressure monitors and other medical devices and communicating the results to a doctor in realtime, according to Dr. Alberto Sanna, manager for e-services for life and health at the Scientific Institute of H. San Raffaele in Milan, Italy, who spoke at the conference. PIPS is being developed by the

Consumer Health Informatics initiative and is funded by the European Union, with 15 collaborators in Europe and China.