

whatcom Independent

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Whatcom County offers cutting-edge medical technology

Technology featured in recent PBS documentary

Naida Grunden - Whatcom Independent

COUNTY - "Are you allergic to any medications?"

Do you wish you had a nickel for every time a healthcare worker has asked you that question?

National studies show that as much as a third of healthcare costs are attributed to waste. One out of every seven hospital admissions occurs because clinicians don't have access to previous medical records, and 20 percent of lab tests are requested because previous results have been lost.

Now imagine if you and members of your care team, anywhere, any time, could have access to your information.

If you are a resident of Whatcom County, that day is here. A secure, internet-based, patient-centered tool, called the Shared Care Plan, is available free to any Whatcom County resident (www.sharedcareplan.org).

Through the Shared Care Plan, patients can take charge of their own health by entering their own lab results, diagnoses, medications and drug allergies. Patients can write in their health goals and post their Advance Directives. The Shared Care Plan even links people with the subscription-only patient information site, Healthwise. Access to this kind of information can be extremely helpful, particularly for people managing chronic illnesses like diabetes, congestive heart failure or asthma.

Although it is a web-based tool, one of the most powerful features of the Shared Care Plan is the printout. Patients can print a small, folding wallet-sized document that gives basic information like current prescriptions, drug allergies and doctors' contact information. Users say these printouts are particularly useful when they are far from home. This summary and detailed printout can be taken to doctor visits to provide a double-check to prevent drug interactions, duplicate testing and other forms of waste.

The unique feature of the Shared Care Plan is who controls this health information. It's the same person who controls your health habits. It's you.

"How did we know what to offer? The patients told us," said Lori Nichols of the Whatcom Health Information Network, which runs the program. "The Shared Care Plan puts information in their hands and engages them in managing their conditions."

Security in sharing

People can elect whether or not they wish to share certain information and with whom. The system complies with the requirements the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996, (HIPAA) patient confidentiality act. Information in the record can be secured to the point that the patient is the only one who ever sees it; other parts can be shared widely. And the sharing can be a two-way street.

For example, people can elect to download certain information into their Shared Care Plans from the records in the St. Joseph Hospital/ PeaceHealth System. The Shared Care Plan "talks" to the

electronic medical record at St Joseph and to the prescription systems at the hospital and in the community (and soon the hospital laboratory). The advantage can work both ways. If you elect to share parts of your Shared Care Plan with community clinicians for emergency access, and are admitted to a PeaceHealth Hospital, a flag will arise on your electronic medical record notifying clinicians to look in your Shared Care Plan for recent health information.

In fact, Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) are interested in your having this basic medical information in the Shared Care Plan. That way, if you are unable to speak in a medical emergency, the EMTs could have an immediate way to determine what conditions you have, what medications you are taking, and which ones you are allergic to. Your Advance Directives no longer need to be posted on your refrigerator, (the current practice advocated by EMTs), but could be available electronically, immediately, to emergency personnel. To share or not—it's at the patient's discretion.

PBS series highlights Whatcom County

Although the Shared Care Plan was developed by and for the residents of Whatcom County, it has garnered national attention. If you saw the Public Television Series, Remaking American Medicine, you saw the national spotlight turn to Whatcom County as an example of hope in caring for people with chronic illnesses. Our county received a Pursuing Perfection grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in 2001 to create a patient-centered, community-wide program to help people prevent chronic illnesses and manage the ones they have.

Part of what makes Whatcom County's program revolutionary is that it is patient-centered. Rather than presuming what would be best for patients, the working group recruited patients living with chronic illnesses and asked them. It was this conversation that led to the Shared Care Plan.

"Possibly the most important thing we have learned," said Nichols, "is that when patients participate in the design, they make an absolutely transformational contribution."

On the horizon

Since the PBS special aired, over 125 communities across the country have inquired about how to institute their own version of the Shared Care Plan. The Network responds by giving away "starter kits" with some basic software and an implementation manual. As part of its long-term strategy, the Network hopes to act as the computer host for the communities going on-line, generating revenue. Otherwise, the Plan is funded through 2007, and other funding is being pursued.

"The Shared Care Plan is available free to Whatcom residents" says Nichols. "However, we accept donations through the St. Joseph Hospital Foundation. Funds can be earmarked for the continuation of the Shared Care Plan."

How to sign up

If you are a resident of Whatcom County who would like to create a Shared Care Plan, go to the website at www.sharedcareplan.org and "Sign up now." If you aren't computer-savvy, staff is available to help you get started. Call 756-6840 to schedule an appointment.

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