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Innovations follow health care changes

Doctor-made apps, websites debut to deliver efficiencies mandated under Obamacare.

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BY NICOLE BROCHU   MCCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS Dubuque, Iowa

With its rollout coming in bits and chunks in the next seven years, the Affordable Care Act's mammoth health reforms are sparking apprehension and confusion among patients and medical providers alike.

But where some see consternation, others see opportunity, including a few doctors who have designed websites, mobile applications and other products to deliver efficiencies that will soon be mandated under Obamacare.

A Fort Lauderdale, Fla., radiologist, for example, has created SecondOpinions.com, connecting patients with board-certified physicians around the country who can offer expert analysis at the touch of a computer keypad -- the kind of quality-assurance technique the Affordable Care Act will eventually require.

"Employers are also using these types of procedures to decrease their health insurance costs," said **Dr. Michael Yuz,** founder SecondOpinions.com. "It's right in line with what Obamacare is trying to do."

Federal law currently offers financial incentives to medical providers who use electronic records, but by 2015, the law's changes mean penalties for those who haven't gone to computerized recordkeeping.

It's all about making the health care system more efficient, cost-effective and safer, said U.S. Rep. Patrick Murphy, D-Fla., adding that the best way to do that is to change how medical providers are compensated, from a pay-for-service model to a pay-for-performance standard.

"Historically, the model has incentivized health care the wrong way," Murphy said. "That's one of the major objectives of Obamacare, to move to a pay-for-performance system, and what it's done is incentivize doctors to ... come up with improvements."

After all, doctors are in the best position to design those improvements since they are on the front lines of the patient delivery system, Murphy and others say.

"I think it's mandatory (that doctors get involved) because physicians have a firsthand grasp of the day-to-day care of patients, and they can best identify improvements and put in place what needs to be done to make the system run more efficiently," said Michael Angelillo, a North Palm Beach, Fla., internist and rheumatologist who helped design the Universal Healthcare Network.

The encrypted network, which is still in its infancy and not fully operational, will securely store a client's medical information online for medical providers to access in emergencies and other medical events, at a cost of $15 a year.

"His idea and others like it, using technology, will help reduce costs," Murphy said. "The biggest problem facing our fiscal house is the rise in health care costs, which drove the effort to pass the Affordable Care Act."

Debbie Hornstein, 62, of Cooper City, Fla., is thankful the health care overhaul is inspiring new efficiencies. She credits SecondOpinions.com with giving her a peace of mind she couldn't get from her own doctor.

Three years into remission for lung cancer, Hornstein said a follow-up CT scan showed "two itsy-bitsy spots" in the area of her lung. Her oncologist assured her they were nothing to worry about, but she felt a whole lot better about that diagnosis when it was confirmed by a board-certified radiologist she found through Yuz's site.

She used a CD of her scan to upload the image onto her computer, sent it to a doctor recommended by SecondOpinions.com, and "within an hour, I had a very comprehensive report, read by a radiologist, from the comfort of my own home," Hornstein said, estimating she paid $68. "If I had gone into a doctor's office, I would have paid a lot more, and you can't always get in. It really put my mind at ease."

Another new high-tech product that recently hit the market was designed specifically for doctors, though it touts results that benefit the patient, too. The Anesthesia Cloud for iPad maintains electronic records for anesthesia providers, reducing the chance for medical mistakes and improving efficiency, its creators say.

"The digital record has improved patient safety and creates a legible digital record available in real-time to the nursing staff," said Wendy Pizzo, director of Resolute Anesthesia and Pain Solutions in Boca Raton, whose founding partner, Dr. Harvey Plosker, helped design the Anesthesia Cloud for iPad. "You must have a physician-driven product that allows for high usability or you will never succeed."

It's not a coincidence that all these new products take advantage of technological advancements to improve the health care system, Murphy said.

"I think technology is the key," he said. "A little bit of an investment early on will pay off in the long run."