

In an age of the Web, Wi-Fi and ever-present social media, so-called e-health lags far behind. But federal officials leading the multibillion effort to get doctors and hospitals to use health information technology are now reaching out to patients and families to help them become e-patients. Farzad Mostashari, national coordinator for health information technology at Department of Health and Human Services, and other top health IT officials outlined plans in the February's Health Affairs journal to expand access, promote innovation and ensure privacy while giving patients and families a bigger role in their care — which evidence suggests enhances quality and improves coordination and communication among multiple health care providers.

“Engaged patients — those who actively seek to know more about and manage their own health — are more likely than others to participate in preventive and healthy practices, self-manage their conditions and achieve better outcomes,” Mostashari, a physician, wrote. That can include reducing the risk of costly repeat hospitalizations and medical errors.

Searching for health information on the Internet has become commonplace, and people with certain conditions connect with one another online, especially through social media.

But the e-health movement goes beyond that and includes expanding access to tools like secure email messaging between patients and doctors, electronic health records that patients can eventually transmit and add to, as well as mobile health apps to promote wellness and monitor chronic diseases. The health IT office is working with 17 so-called Beacon communities, where ideas such as a text-messaging program for diabetes risk assessment are being tried.

“The role of the Office of the National Coordinator in advancing consumer e-health is primarily as a catalyst and coordinator, providing incentives and support to others — such as patients, providers and technology developers — who are at the forefront of furthering consumer engagement via e-health. The office also coordinates federal policies, investments and activities,” the team wrote.

The effort builds on what HHS has been doing for several years to get doctors and hospitals to adopt “meaningful use” of computerized medical records. But progress has been mixed, and

## Feds' 'E-Health' initiative reaches out to patients

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savings elusive, with many medical practices still paper-based and lots of obstacles to creating interconnected electronic systems that could reduce the fragmentation, duplication and poor communication. in the health care system.

New requirements, effective in October for hospitals using electronic health records and January 2014 for physicians, will make it easier for patients to email doctors and transmit their health information to a third party.

The health IT office has also created a Web-based "model privacy notice." Companies' participation is voluntary, but the Federal Trade Commission can monitor compliance. The health IT office has also expanded use of its Blue Button — a computer icon that shows the health data on the participating site is accessible and secure — which began in the Department of Veterans Affairs to Defense, Medicare and some private insurers in the federal health benefits plan.

Mostashari noted that there has to be a cultural shift to a less hierarchical medical system. Patients must become as comfortable asking questions and using electronic health information as they are tweeting what they had for breakfast.

**Source: *politico.com***