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You need a personal electronic record

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THE PEAK of hurricane season forced the evacuation of millions from New Orleans, Houston and other parts of the country. The nation's newest crop of college freshmen began the fall semester with many parents worried about their health and safety (first and foremost), among other concerns. And soon, many retirees ("snowbirds") will travel south for some respite from another New England winter.

What do these scenarios have in common? They each represent the importance for everyone — seniors, college students and families — to have their vital health information accessible at all times. As emergency room doctors, we cannot stress this enough. When doctors have the right information at their fingertips, patients receive better treatment and better outcomes.

This fact has triggered a movement in the health-care industry toward electronic health records. Most medical experts agree that bringing patient records into the computer age is crucial to improving care, reducing errors and containing costs. However, a recent report published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* found that while doctors are aware of the benefits of electronic health records, fewer than one in five have started using them.

In fact, less than 10 percent of private practices consisting of one to three doctors — where nearly half of the country's doctors practice medicine —

reported using electronic medical records, according to a national survey. While large hospitals and insurance networks are making the switch to electronic medical records for patients, few private doctors can afford to make this investment.

In addition, software differences among hospitals, insurance providers and doctors make it difficult to share patient information — a reality that forfeits the central benefit of electronic records. But there is another solution everyone should be aware of: electronic *personal* health records. This is where *you*, the patient, can actively manage and share your personal health information with doctors electronically.

There are several ways you can do this. One example that we've found successful for patients is called ER Card. ER Card is an electronic personal health record and health-care-management service. The service is compliant with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPPA) and it lets users create and share their electronic personal health record with doctors during emergencies or routine care. ER Card records are comprehensive and the software is very easy to use.

Each record contains information about special medical conditions, allergies, medications, immunizations, major surgeries, emergency contacts, a list of physicians and their contact information and more. The information is completely confidential and stored on a private network, and can be updated as often as necessary. Once ready, users can synchronize their per-

sonal health records with a portable device — in a credit-card size, as a key-chain accessory or as a bracelet — that they can then share with doctors at medical appointments or keep with them for emergencies. Doctors can even access someone's record on the Internet, by email or by phone if necessary.

The bottom line is that electronic personal health records, such as ER Card, are an effective and easy way to provide health-care professionals with immediate access to one's complete and accurate health information. Electronic personal health records are part of a patient-centric movement that the health-care industry is undergoing, where patients take a more active role in managing their own care.

As emergency medical physicians, we have witnessed firsthand how crucial information about a person's medical history can reduce medical mistakes and greatly improve the quality of health care provided by primary care physicians, nurses, specialists and others, including those of us in the ER. While the debate continues on electronic medical records, we urge patients to take advantage of electronic personal health records that are available today, so they can put themselves in the driver's seat of managing and ensuring their own care.

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