

A card to save your life and cut paperwork

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IN A RECENT visit to Rhode Island, U.S. Deputy Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar proposed creating a system that would allow patient information to be shared among health-care providers (“All eyes on health care,” Jan. 13, by Arthur Kimball-Stanley). The concept of creating such a program for Rhode Island is commendable — and moot, since such a system, through ER Card, has been offered here for the past eight years.

ER Card is a Rhode Island company, partnered with another Ocean State business, Purvis Systems, which together have designed an innovative way to deliver health-care information to caregivers and emergency first responders across the state. The City of Warwick has been a proud affiliate of ER Card for the past four years.

Two years ago, the city, Kent Hospital and ER Card also joined forces to allow information on an ER Card to be shared with laptops installed in all Warwick rescue vehicles. This program lets EMTs import, and have instant access to, an array of vital medical information — including a patient’s allergies, medications, chronic medical conditions, past surgeries, insurance information, emergency contacts, name, address and date of birth. In four short years, shared medical information has allowed our first responders to better identify — early on — the health and medical status of our residents.

ER Card is designed to be patient-focused, primarily addressing the needs of the consumer, thereby improving both clinical outcomes for patients and financial outcomes for payers. Not only does it provide around-the-clock access to life-saving medical information, it also minimizes liability to caregivers; reduces a patient’s risk by reducing medical mistakes; ensures informed care and responsible decisions are made regarding diagnosis and treatment options by putting one’s medical history at a caregiver’s fingertips; reduces paperwork by providing a standard medical record; eliminates redundant lab tests; is a security package that coordinates medical care; provides a return on investment by tracking patients’ emergency room visits and prescription buying habits; complies with federal health-care insurance regulations; enhances communications between doctors and the patient; allows for duplicate and contra-indicated medications to be easily discovered; and provides information sharing among doctors, hospitals, case-management agencies and treatment facilities.

Because it is run by an independent company, and not an insurance payer or provider, the ER Card is more likely to include honest information from patients — if they are not taking prescribed medications (for whatever reason) or have not completed a doctor-ordered test, for example. The database also includes any over-the-counter medication

that an individual takes — information that can only be provided by the patient himself. Its reporting features also allow for timely notification of members in the event of a drug recall.

And, because one of the program's goals is to provide a comprehensive care management system, outreach efforts are also a component and include information and referrals for community-based services and interventions, such as RIPAE, Meals on Wheels, Advance Medical Directives, documenting emergency evacuation information and reminders for preventative care visits and inoculations.

Data show that the system is working, and working well, for the nearly 3,500 ER Card members and the countless physicians, nurses and EMTs who treat them; a study of health-care professionals found that the system has been very effective in lessening patient anxiety during a medical emergency, takes guess work out of the medical history-taking process by providing more accurate medical information. In one case, information about a patient's diagnosis of Alzheimer's helped to clarify the reason for her impaired consciousness.

In Warwick, with nearly 11,000 rescue runs a year in the city, the ER Card has allowed our EMTs to get back on the road faster to care for other residents. Patients have reported that the program saves time, results in faster service, reassures them that their provider has accurate information, and eliminates the worry of having to recall critical information while under pressure.

The ER Card also saves money. Locally, the software has led to a roughly 15-percent savings in costs associated with the city's compliance with the state Department of Health's reporting requirements.

These savings could be vast. It is estimated that 130 million Americans take prescription drugs monthly, with 1.5 million injured every year by drug errors — and that does not take into account patient error. The annual bill for treating medication misuse is \$177 billion.

Use of the type of technology provided by ER Card will help to reduce diagnostic errors and other mistakes made in overwhelmed emergency rooms throughout the country. Experts believe that this type of technology could easily save \$120 billion a year in health care costs.

Deputy Secretary Azar's visit to Rhode Island does allow the City of Warwick to remind people that electronic medical records are not an idea of the future. It is here and now. ER Card is working to better manage health care in this city and should be expanded throughout Rhode Island.

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