



IDEAS & INNOVATIONS

Who's Your "Health Buddy"?

After undergoing open-heart surgery, Joan heads home from the hospital with myriad medications. "If only I had a little help in keeping track of my pills," she thinks to herself.

Patients like Joan may be in luck, if their physician equips them with the Health Buddy®, an in-home messaging device that facilitates patient-provider communications. Designed to help patients manage chronic illness more effectively, the "buddy" was designed by the California-based Health Hero Network® Online Service.

The appliance, which is about the size of a paperback book, is currently being used for chronic conditions like asthma, diabetes and congestive heart failure, said Shawn Hopwood, the network's marketing director. A few conditions—including depression—are also in the "testing" stage, he added, and some managed care plan customers would like to incorporate wellness-related programs, such as smoking cessation and weight loss.

How does the communications system work? Patients connect the device to an existing home telephone line, and they can then view questions and daily reminders from their provider on a brightly lit screen, much much like that on a home computer. Four large buttons allow patients to respond to closed-end queries sent to them by their nurse or doctor. The providers, in turn, have access to patient information through the Internet. Reports establishing trends can be compiled with the

touch of a few buttons, and providers receive alerts if the patient's response falls outside set parameters.

A typical initial question the "buddy" asks a patient is, "How do you feel today?" Then, depending on the disease being monitored, it will ask more specific questions, Hopwood explained. For someone with diabetes, for instance, the "buddy" will ask, "Have you checked your feet today?" or "Do you have any new sores?" Similarly, for congestive heart failure patients, it would ask, "Are you experiencing any shortness of breath?"

Introduced last May, the appliance is currently being used by more than 1,000 customers nationwide, including in California, Illinois, Nebraska, New York, Oregon and Texas. The monitoring device itself is supplied free of charge, and providers pay a monthly fee of \$25 per patient for the technical backup.

Its benefits include the avoidance of costly hospital stays and improved patient education, by teaching individuals to take better care of themselves and to manage their disease more effectively. In addition, the "buddy" offers a bonus to rural communities, where it may not be easy for patients to get to a medical facility on a regular basis.

One Oregon physician who is testing the theory of the "buddy's" effectiveness in rural areas is Bruce Brundage, M.D., medical director of the Heart Institute of the Cascades. According to Brundage, he first heard about the device from a colleague's daughter. Given the

geographical reach of the institute's cardiology clinic—it serves people across 25,000 square miles—and the fact that many patients can't come to the medical center for regular follow-ups, he said he thought the "buddy" might be a good way to gauge the use of technology across the miles.

Brundage and his colleagues at the institute thus set up a clinical trial for 200 patients (100 of whom will use the "buddy") that started a few months ago. They hope to determine first, whether it's feasible to get patients to use the "Health Buddy" and second, whether using the device will make a real difference in patient outcomes (hospitalization and emergency room visits, for example) and quality of life, and what its impact from a financial perspective will be.

Are there any downsides to using the device? Brundage says he hasn't run into any yet, but that the potential certainly exists. One question, he said, is whether the patient will continue to use the 'buddy' after a month, "or will he decide it's a pain in the neck?"

Even if that does happen, however, the doctor predicted that technology will continue to play a big—if not expanding—role in advancing modern medicine. "It's changing the way we do everything," Brundage noted. "There are physicians who communicate with their patients everyday *via* the Internet." The technological revolution, he asserted, "has only just begun." • MG

Contact the Health Hero Network at (650) 559-1000 or visit its website at <http://www.hhn.com>