

LAREDO MORNING TIMES

LAREDO, TX  
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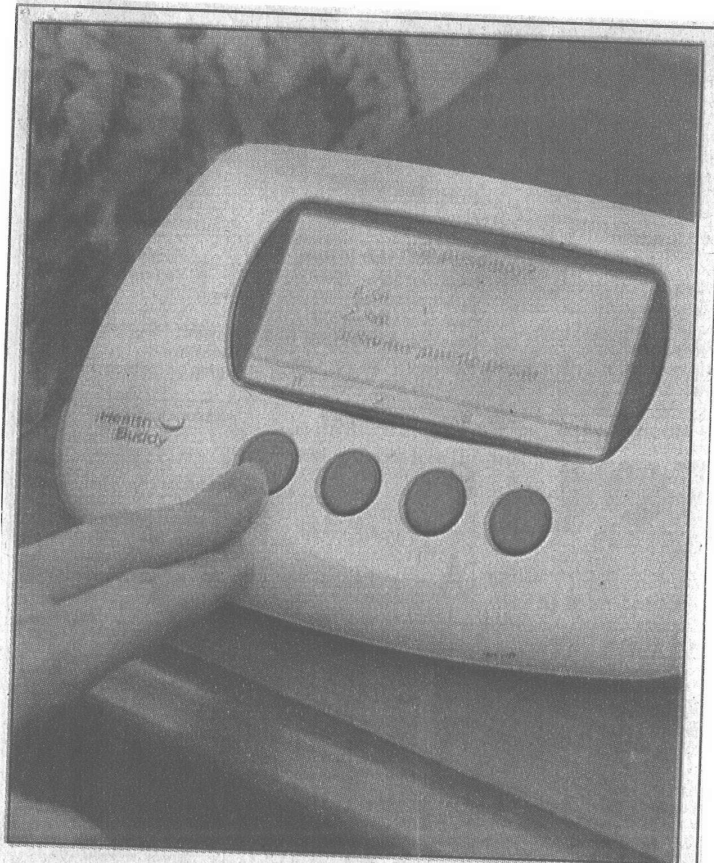


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**Buddy**

AP photo  
FRONT PAGE

This small plastic item works like a medical Richter Scale, to keep patient, and hospital aware of possible problems. Read related story p. 2A.

enough to require a long and costly hospital stay.

"We're trying to catch them before they go into crisis so they can see their doctor instead of having to go into the hospital," Rodriguez said.

The record kept by the health buddy can also be printed out, giving physicians detailed visual keys to the patient's changing health.

Mercy Health Center established its Health Buddy system as part of a cooperative project with the University of Texas Health Sciences Center - San Antonio.

Money for the program has been provided by a grant from the telecommunications infrastructure fund of the state of Texas.

Health Buddies currently serve about 20 Laredoans, mostly from the city's indigent population.

Indigents often have difficulty accessing health care and therefore are among those that have the most to gain from the services the Health Buddy offers.

Diabetes and congestive heart failure were targeted by the program because they are prominent conditions in Laredo and can be effectively monitored by the buddy system.

The Mercy/UTHSC-SA program is the only Health Buddy system in Texas.

It is also the only bilingual program in the nation. The Laredo Health Buddies are capable of asking their questions in either Spanish or English.

Mercy has provided extensive support services to the patients involved in the program.

In addition to delivering and installing the health buddy, project staff also provide patients with a tutorial on its use.

Scales, blood pressure cuffs, and other instruments to measure a patient's condition are also provided with demonstrations on their use.

The Health Buddy system has another important benefit — it encourages patients to become more involved in their own health.

"It makes them more pro-active about their own health. It can help teach patients to better manage their own disease," Rodriguez explained.

By making them an active participant in their own health care, patients find themselves more aware and concerned about their own health.

If patients forget about entering the data, Health Buddy will give them a friendly reminder. When Health Buddy hasn't gotten information for the day, it will beep at the patients.

Gwen Loera, planning and marketing specialist for Mercy, says that Health Buddy not only protects life, it protects "quality of life."

By better managing their conditions, patients reduce the risk of the debilitating side effects that accompany their conditions, she said.

Even when a patient does have to be admitted to the hospital, Health Buddy has a role to play, Rodriguez added.

"If they do have to come in to the hospital, hopefully they won't have to be in as long because Health Buddy's moni-