

Trendlines

The Buddy System

HEALTH CARE If you're one of the fortunate folk, health care is mostly a matter of an occasional visit to a doctor's office, perhaps a prescription, lots of fluids and a day off from work. But for a diabetic or an asthmatic, that's not enough. These individuals need to monitor their conditions more or less constantly—and the health-care system isn't set up to help them do that.

"Health care is based on treating people, not managing their health," says John Glaser, vice president and CIO of Partners HealthCare System Inc. in Boston. (For more on health care, see "Information Sickness," Page 52.)

Studies show that it costs less to help an asthmatic manage her illness than to wait until there's a crisis, but few convenient methods have emerged to create a strong daily link between doctors and their chronically ill patients that don't involve somebody traveling somewhere—until the Internet.

Health Hero Network Inc. (www.healthhero.com), a Mountain View, Calif.-based company, has developed an automated online service that relies on a simple device called the Health Buddy, which patients of participating doctors use to update their conditions and receive information, messages and reminders. The device, about the size of a palmtop, has a back-lit screen that can flash a set of multiple-choice questions developed by a doctor to track an illness. The patient hits one of four buttons on the keypad to answer the questions, such as, "How are you feeling this morning?" The Health Buddy, which hooks into the patient's phone line, dials Health Hero's data center, where the updates are stored in a patient database. The doctor can then access the data through the Internet, where she logs on to a secure area on Health Hero's Web site to view the updates.

Health Hero is currently filing for permission from the FDA to connect Health Buddy to blood glucose meters and eventually to blood pressure cuffs and other diagnostic equipment in patients' homes and download that biometric information automatically, saving the patient a lot of hassle and doctors a lot of time. The company plans someday to use the Health Buddy for other services, such as postoperative monitoring.

There's no word yet whether Health Hero will supply that stiff white rice paper for the patients to sit on while they hook themselves up to the equipment. ■



The Health Buddy patient monitoring system

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