



Easing the Elderly Online in Search of Health Information

By Brian Vastag

...Patients with chronic illnesses in the Veterans Affairs health care system are getting on the Internet in a completely different way, through a tiny appliance called the Health Buddy. The size of a desktop phone and just as straightforward, the Health Buddy plugs into a phone line and prompts the user to answer targeted health questions—such as “Have you checked your blood sugar today?”—by pressing one of four large buttons. It sends the information to a password-protected Web site, where a nurse or other health care professional can monitor hundreds of patients.

“It’s not threatening, and it’s extremely easy for our patients to use,” said Rita Kobb, a care coordinator for North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System. When Kobb logs onto her Web site, it tells her how many patients answered their questions that day, and it flags patients with potential problems. “Our patients don’t necessarily use it every day, but even in they answer the questions four or five times a week, that’s a lot more monitoring than they’d regularly get,” said Kobb. She keeps tabs on 170 patients and said that she could track 500 “very easily.”

Veterans Affairs staff worked with the company that makes the machine, Health Hero Network Inc, Mountain View, Calif, to develop targeted questionnaires for patients with diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic disorders. Kobb said that using the tool keeps patients involved with their own health care while providing repeated opportunities for patient education. About 1500 patients will be using the system by September, a number expected to double next year. And there’s another benefit: reduced costs from slashing unnecessary hospital stays and prescriptions. “After trying it with 476 patients, we’ve already paid for our eight pilot projects, which cost \$750,000 each,” said Kobb.

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