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YOUR UPDATE ON HEALTH IN WESTERN NEBRASKA • VOL. 13, SPRING 2008

Planning for a panhandle-wide health information exchange

With 90,000-plus residents spread out over 14,000 square miles of rural Nebraska prairie, collaboration and cooperation between panhandle health care providers is a necessity. For nearly a decade, members of the Rural Nebraska Healthcare Network have worked together to improve health care delivery while keeping patients at their local provider when possible.

When the Western Nebraska Health Information Exchange was organized five years ago, planning began for an electronic medical record that would link hospitals and providers in 12 Nebraska counties. Dan Griess, CEO of Box Butte General Hospital in Alliance, is a member of the Rural Nebraska Healthcare Network and the Western Nebraska Health Information Exchange, says the group recently selected three software vendor finalists and is in the process of conducting site visits to see the software in use.

"Because they each offer strong advantages, it will be a tough choice. We may choose components from more than one vendor to maximize expertise and get the perfect fit for our needs," he says. "From a practical standpoint, each hospital can't afford a system like this alone, but it makes sense as a collaborative partnership."

Whether patients visit a clinic, hospital or behavioral health provider, provider groups will be able to exchange patient information as needed, eliminating duplication of services while saving time and money for patients and providers.

Lisa Bewley, Regional West Medical Center Chief Information Officer and

Health information exchange

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president of the Western Nebraska Health Information Exchange, uses X-rays as one example where potential savings exist. "Say for example, a patient from Chadron breaks his arm and has it X-rayed in the local emergency room, then later has outpatient surgery for that same arm at Regional West. With the electronic medical record, instead of having duplicate X-rays taken in Scottsbluff or having the process slowed by using mail service, the X-rays can be accessed immediately with the collaborative system," she says. "It puts the patient in the center of the panhandle's circle of care."

"We're such a mobile society anymore that many people see multiple providers," concludes Griess. "With an electronic medical record in place, providers can increase efficiency of patient care while decreasing cost of care over time."