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AT&T, Tenn. Create Medical Info Exchange

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) -- AT&T Inc. is partnering with Tennessee to provide the country's first statewide system to electronically exchange patient medical information, the telecommunications company said Monday.

The system is designed to securely transmit detailed patient information between medical professionals. It will allow doctors to access medical histories, prescribe medicines over the Internet and transfer images like X-rays, MRIs and CT scans.

“As patients we really want our information to be available to physicians whenever and wherever they're needed,” said Diane Turcan, director of health care marketing for AT&T in Atlanta. “And we certainly don't want to be copying paper records.”

Tennessee's program is seen as a model for other states and may be a springboard for interstate information sharing networks in the future, she said.

Doctors can use the system to remotely evaluate patients in rural areas who have less access to medical facilities. It will also link to the state Department of Health for access to the immunization and disease registry, death certificate processing and medical license renewals.

Tennessee Gov. Phil Bredesen, who ran HealthAmerica Corp. before becoming a politician, has championed electronic records because of the inefficiency of the current paper-based system.

“If patients' medical history and record of care are available to their hospital, laboratory, pharmacy or physician, then they will ultimately receive better and more cost-effective medical care,” Bredesen said in a written statement.

AT&T is developing a private portal within the secure network it already provides for state agencies in Tennessee. Turcan said AT&T's investment in the portal has been “significant” but declined to elaborate.

Antoine Agassi, director and chairman of the governor's eHealth Council, said Tennessee's deal with AT&T should keep costs down for individual subscribers. Doctors can apply for state grants to defray the costs of getting set up on the system.

“Having the ability to get this from a pre-negotiated service level at a very, very competitive rate is a huge step forward,” he said.

The state and AT&T will spend most of this year fine-tuning the system and hope that consumers will begin to notice a change by the end of 2008, Agassi said.