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Tennessee, AT&T Partner to Develop E-Health Info System

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The state of Tennessee is partnering with AT&T to develop the first statewide electronic health information system in the United States. The system will enable Tennessee-based medical professionals to share patient records and information through a secure network extending across the entire state.

The system will also link to the Tennessee Department of Health, to provide access to its immunization and disease registry, information about death certificate processing, and medical license renewals.

Tennessee and AT&T will spend most of the year working on the system. They hope consumers will begin to see it in practice by the end of 2008, according to Antoine Agassi, director and chair of Gov. Phil Bredesen's (D) eHealth Council.

Increased Access

The network is aimed at helping Tennessee health care professionals provide medical services to patients who suffer from illnesses requiring consultation from more than one medical practitioner, say those involved in its development.

Proponents say the new system also will help increase access for residents and families previously unable to access certain health care services, particularly in rural areas of the state.

In the past, many rural Tennessee residents have been referred to larger facilities in urban areas, which required more time and travel expenses and caused delays in treatment. With telemedicine, a medical practitioner in an urban area will be able to diagnose and recommend treatment immediately to a resident in a rural location.

Ultimately, supporters say, the system will reduce time, cost, and effort for both the patient and the medical practitioner.

Private Sector Needed

Although the expected system will include important technological innovations and medical advancements, it also presents some concerns.

John R. Graham, director of health care studies at the San Francisco-based Pacific Research Institute, says he believes in the concept of telemedicine but would like to see more involvement from the private sector. "I am disappointed to see, once again, that the government is behind it," said Graham. "Why can't companies touting health IT manage to compete without government support?"

Graham also points out a paperless system is not necessarily better.

"We have to stop thinking about a paper-based 'system' versus an electronic 'system,'" Graham said. "Whatever each patient wants, that's what he should get. And the only way to achieve that is to give health care dollars back to the patients and let them decide where to spend them."