

California Telehealth Network Connects Doctors to Patients

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The California Telehealth Network is an effort to create the nation's largest health care IT wireless infrastructure so doctors can monitor patients remotely, particularly patients in rural areas.

California has formed what it says is the United States' largest telehealth network to deliver medical care to patients in rural and underserved areas.

At a news conference at the University of California Davis Cancer Center, in Sacramento, Calif., Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and U.S. CTO Aneesh Chopra were among the dignitaries discussing the project.

"Through a simple broadband link, this state-of-the-art system will save lives by instantly connecting people from across the state, including underserved and rural areas, with the best and brightest doctors," Schwarzenegger said in a statement. "The California Telehealth Network marks the beginning of a new digital highway that will fundamentally change the future of how health care is provided."

The CTN builds upon the broadband task force Schwarzenegger's administration created in 2006, he said, according to a transcript of the event.

"My dream was to build broadband networks all across the state of California so that everyone could consult the best and the brightest medical experts," the governor said, adding that UC Davis is building a 52,000-square-foot facility to train doctors in telemedicine.

The new network also aims to provide security for EMRs (electronic medical records) and prescriptions, he said.

The CTN is intended to connect 800 medical sites within three years, starting with Oroville Hospital in Oroville, Calif., and the CommuniCare Health Center in West Sacramento. AT&T will build the telecommunications infrastructure for the telehealth network, which will allow doctors to monitor patients remotely at clinics and hospitals through a wireless broadband peer-to-peer connection.

The CTN is a combination public and private network that drew on \$30 million to get started, including \$22.1 million from the Federal Communications Commission and \$3.6 million in matching funds from the California Emerging Technology Fund. Other organizations that contributed grants include the California HealthCare Foundation, UnitedHealthcare, the National Coalition for Healthcare Integration and the University of California.

At the news conference, CTN Executive Director Eric Brown said the network will use telemedicine applications to conduct physician consultations over high-definition video and to exchange medical records and X-rays. Chopra said the CTN will be the foundation for economic growth in the nation's health care system.

The launch of the CTN on Aug. 17 is getting mixed reactions from industry experts, however.



ZDNet health care blogger Dana Blankenhorn predicted that the new telehealth network will fail due to a lack of uniform standards for EMR applications.


"Without standards that are applied uniformly, all you can possibly have is a two-way transmission of data, which is heavily dependent on both sides of the line using the same formats," Blankenhorn wrote. "Telemedicine cannot be divorced from EMRs."

Gregg Malkary, founder and managing director of Spyglass Consulting Group, acknowledged the interoperability challenges


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of the CTN but predicted success for the effort because of the federal government's meaningful use mandate on how to implement electronic records to receive federal stimulus money.

"As the network starts to come online and the vendors are held to task because of meaningful use requirements, I think the issues of continuity of care and continuity-of-care records will start to be addressed," Malkary told eWEEK.

As further reasons to expect success for the CTN, Malkary noted the additional funds now available from public and private sources, faster broadband download speeds of 5M bps and the success of telemedicine technology in studies.

"Remote patient monitoring technology has been demonstrated to be clinically effective for specific diseases like COPD [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease], diabetes and asthma," Malkary said. "We need to find a meaningful and cheap way to deliver care to people in remote and even underserved urban areas."

One issue that was not addressed in the CTN announcement was how doctors will be reimbursed for telemedicine services and how billing codes will be applied, Malkary added.

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