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'Smart' cards can store key medical info

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You're driving alone one night when WHAM! a car broadsides you, knocking you unconscious.

In the rescue squad, an attendant finds your universal health card and slips it into a hand-held computer, which quickly displays your name, blood type, allergies and other vital information.

At the hospital, a nurse in the emergency room punches up more information in the computer: your doctor's name; a family member to contact; a list of medications you take; operations you've had; cautionary comments from your doctor.

That's one of a number of scenarios offered by creators of Health Data Card, which they hope eventually will be available in Omaha and nationwide.

Dr. Daniel Dietrich, Henry Zach and Ron Novero founded the company, which employs 11 people and has offices at 9910 N. 48th St. The partners have invested \$1.5 million over the last two and a half years.

The universal health card still is a dream, but people who hear about it embrace the idea, said Zach, who is president of the company.

"The response we're getting has been very good," he said.

Alegent Health, Methodist Hospital, Children's Hospital, the Creighton University Medical Center and the Nebraska Medical Center recently agreed to install the system's software in their emergency rooms.

Plans also are under way to put hand-held card readers in Omaha rescue squads and ambulances.

And HDC is talking with insurance companies, employers and other groups about getting the cards out to people, with a goal of 100,000 cards within a year.

The cards retail for \$65 to \$75 each, but large groups could pay less than \$30. HDC is distributing the software free to medical providers, and the card-reading devices cost about \$30 to \$50.

Next comes the Lincoln market and soon after that St. Louis through a distributor, the first of a planned nationwide network of 22 distributorships.

The system uses what are known as "smart" cards, which carry memory chips that hold more information than the magnetic strips found on most credit cards.

Putting medical information on such a card is the easy part, said Donald Davis, editor of Card Technology magazine of Chicago. The Omaha group isn't the first to think about a smart card carrying medical information, he said.

"The card won't do you any good unless the EMT in the ambulance or the doctor in the hospital can read it," Davis said. "That's always been the big obstacle. If they have a plan for how to do that, they may be on their way."

Beyond that, he said, the company will have to convince doctors, hospitals and insurance companies that the card will benefit them financially. That some Omaha hospitals have agreed to install the software in their emergency rooms is a promising sign, Davis said.

"Sooner or later, somebody's going to make it work," Davis said. "The technology's getting better and cheaper."

HDC's Zach has explained the system to several community groups, including the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce's health-care council, of which he is a member, and the Metropolitan Omaha Medical Society, which represents physicians.

"The whole concept of having that information readily available is a great idea," said Robin Kammandel, executive director of the medical group. "Thank goodness for entrepreneurship."

The group doesn't endorse such programs, she said, but its leaders were satisfied with the card system's security measures and could see potential advantages.

But the card's success, she said, will depend on logistical details - getting cards in widespread circulation and making them worthwhile for hospitals, doctors, insurance companies, employers and the average person.

Most doctor's offices, for example, don't have time to sell the cards to patients, Kammandel said. It remains to be seen whether insurance companies, employers and the average person would buy them.

Zach believes they will.

The concept grew from the experiences of Omaha physician Daniel Dietrich when he was a patient himself and from the experiences of his wife, Lynda, a nurse. As a patient, he said, he had to recite his medical information many times to medical-care providers. Once, groggy with medication, he forgot to mention that he was allergic to penicillin.

After that, Dietrich said, he and his wife wondered if it wouldn't be better to have that kind of information on a handy, reliable card.

"The more we looked at it, the more it seemed like a better and better idea," Dietrich said.

He hooked up with Ron Novero, now HDC's chief operating officer, and with Zach, who has marketing and business startup experience.

"Our big thrust was to develop the software and get it to the physicians to use it," Dietrich said. Revenue from the cards will support the free software, he said.

As a test, he gave cards to his own patients and placed card readers with other doctors he knows. The system works, he said.

"I've got a bias, but from my standpoint, it's been wonderful," he said. "I think it has great potential."