

# Health Data Card

BY ROBERT FRAASS

When Omaha physician Dan Dietrich was diagnosed with cancer in 2000, he dealt with the usual medical bureaucracy that faces any patient who must contend with multiple doctors and healthcare facilities. Seven times he filled out forms listing personal and medical information. But one time, he forgot to list a drug allergy, which led to a problem during treatment.

Dr. Dietrich recovered, and his experience gave his wife Lynda an idea: why not put medical information on an electronic card that patients could take with them wherever they go?

Lynda Dietrich's idea inspired her husband to launch Health Data Card (HDC), an Omaha company that has developed leading-edge technology that stores an individual's medical information in a tiny microprocessor and memory chip embedded in a credit card-sized "smart card." Although competitors offer forms of digital medical records, HDC is the only company offering health record storage on individualized medical smart cards, according to Keith Clark, HDC's sales manager.

Here's how it works: A patient fills out a form with comprehensive medical information, including insurance information, medications, allergies, immunization records, advisories and family medical history. The information is converted into a digital document and downloaded onto the medical smart card, which remains in the possession of the patient. The card is secure; it can only be activated, written to, and read by participating healthcare facilities, which have specialized HDC-provided software.

"The real advantage of the card ... is that it allows patient-controlled access to their own health information," says Dr. Timothy D. Ranney, senior vice president and medical director of Health Service Programs for Blue Cross Blue Shield (BCBS) of Nebraska.

Ranney is overseeing a recently launched 18-month pilot program in which discounted HDC smart cards are offered to BCBS employees and family members. Program officials will study



what value the employees get from the cards and how they are using them. If all goes well, he says, BCBS will offer the cards to its employer groups.

BCBS looked at other options, Ranney says, but chose HDC because of its cards' excellent security measures and because employees are comfortable with a medical card that works much like a credit or ATM card. The card also complies with the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

The HDC system has many advantages over paper records, including better efficiency in checking in patients and related paperwork, improved accuracy that leads to better diagnosis by doctors, and better response time during medical emergencies, Ranney says.

"We were so excited about patient-controlled access to their health records that we had to look at it (through this pilot

program)," Ranney says. "You'll see a lot of efficiencies with these cards that you don't have now."

Dietrich co-founded HDC in 2001 with company president Henry Zach and COO/CFO Ron Novero. At first, they focused the company's efforts on Omaha-area emergency responders. HDC developed specialized PDA-like card readers, provided free to emergency responders, which can read the medical smart cards that provide medical information needed in an emergency.

By September 2003, HDC reached an agreement with Omaha's five major metropolitan healthcare systems to install its software on hospital emergency room computers. HDC's services are expanding into other areas of the hospitals' operations as well, Clark says.

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National Bank of Omaha, HDC has donated its PDA card readers to 20 Omaha rescue squads and emergency response teams and plans to donate readers to equip the 158 ambulances within 50 miles of Omaha.

Getting the technology into the hands of emergency medical workers is important, Clark says, because of the estimated 200,000 emergency room visits each year

in Omaha, one-third of these patients need treatment in less than 15 minutes. If emergency information is available on a card carried by the patient, miscommunication can be avoided and lives can be saved, he says.

HDC has now shifted its focus on getting Omaha-area health facilities on the smart card bandwagon. About two dozen medical offices have HDC's free card

readers installed, and about 200 more have the program under review, Clark says.

Because HDC distributes its card readers and PDAs free of charge, the company relies on the per-card fees it charges its clients, which include employers who provide cards to employees, insurance companies, pharmaceuticals and health-care providers. Individuals can also apply for a card through the HDC Web site or by mail.

"There's been a lot of momentum (nationally) in the last 12 months to get away from paper and include patients with their personal health information," Clark says.

Federal health officials have made creating electronic medical records (EMRs) a top priority. Although HDC's system does not create EMRs as the federal government defines them, the cards can play a role in moving medical records into a digital format, Clark says. Company officials have met with officials from 35 different states, and federal health officials, including former U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson about the smart cards.

"Our cards are a way for doctors to work smarter, not harder, and have more face time with patients," he says.

HDC's smart cards have received a key endorsement from the Metro Omaha Medical Society (MOMS), a physicians' professional organization with an emphasis on doctor-patient advocacy. MOMS is encouraging healthcare facilities to adopt the HDC model of portable medical records, says Dr. David Filipi, MOMS president-elect and vice president of medical affairs for Physicians Clinic.

The organization, Filipi says, sees medical smart cards as a means to achieve more effective medical treatment and more accurate and faster medical diagnosis. Medical smart cards are getting more attention because the technology is affordable and easy to use and privacy issues have been addressed.

"Instead of being locked away in an office, these records are with the patient," Filipi says. "For hospitals, this can make clear the diagnosis and save some lives." ■



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