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News Release

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VA To Use Computer Technology to Improve Informed Consent

WASHINGTON – Continuing its innovation in health care information technology, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is adopting a new computer program to help patients make more informed decisions about their care.

VA will introduce its Electronic Support for Patient Decisions initiative at all 158 VA medical centers within a year. Customized software called iMedConsent will provide patients with information about treatment options and standardize procedures among clinicians.

“We owe it to our veterans to do all we can to ensure that they understand the care they receive and to make sure that the informed consent process is as patient-friendly as possible,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi. “This new program is a great complement to the success of VA’s electronic patient records systems.”

The iMedConsent program takes physicians step by step through the informed consent process, displays detailed educational materials about risks and benefits of proposed treatments, generates and stores consent forms, incorporates electronic signatures into records and imports information from patient records. Although the program is designed primarily to assist physicians, it also guides informed-consent discussions between doctors and patients.

The goal of the informed consent process is to ensure that patients are knowledgeable participants in decisions about their health care. It generally requires that patients understand their choices through discussions of proposed treatments, reasonable alternatives to proposed care, risks and benefits of each alternative.

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VA informed consent program 2/2/2

The electronic support system is VA's latest use of technology to enhance patient care. For several decades, VA has led the health care industry in use of electronic health records with its Veterans Health Information Systems and Technology (VistA), which allows health care providers to continuously update patient information, including lab tests and results, medications and diet.

The electronic health record provides clinicians throughout the VA system instant access to a patient's complete record, including diagnostic images, medications and lab results. The information is available in inpatient, outpatient, long-term and home care environments. Patient records can also be accessed remotely, allowing, for example, doctors at the San Francisco VA Medical Center to promptly treat a veteran from Miami who seeks care while traveling in California.

VistA has a dramatic impact on patient safety and health. Bar-coded medication administration for inpatients and robotic prescription preparation are achieving the highest rates of prescription accuracy. A clinical reminder system allows care providers to consistently deliver necessary health interventions.

"This has allowed VA to set the benchmark for 18 externally comparable indicators of quality in disease prevention and treatment," said Dr. Jonathan Perlin, VA's acting under secretary for health.

The iMedConsent software was developed under the direction of VA's National Center for Ethics in Health Care by Atlanta-based software developer Dialog Medical. "We are always looking for ways to enhance the care we provide," said Dr. Ellen Fox, center director. "By supporting patient decisions on a systems level, we are preventing problems before they arise. We like to call this 'preventive ethics'."

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