

Electronic connection speeds eye care for diabetic patients

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Up until two years ago, Dr. Michele Violich kept hand-written records for all her patients at the Watsonville Health Center. Now she has a new system that can track eye exam results for diabetic patients without ever having to print out a paper report.

"I'm on cloud nine about it," she said.

The new system takes aim at diabetes, which affects an estimated one out of seven Pajaro Valley residents. Because diabetics are at greater risk of losing their sight due to cataracts or glaucoma, an annual eye exam is recommended.

The patient's retina is photographed in the clinic with a digital camera. Ophthalmologists access and interpret the images and share their assessment with the patient's doctor electronically — no need to leave a paper report in the doctor's in-basket. The system alerts doctors when their patients are due for their annual eye exam and, in minutes, can generate a report indicating which patients are overdue.

At a clinic that sees more than

100 diabetics a month, those steps can speed up diagnosis and treatment.

"What's exciting about electronic medical records is how you improve care with it," said Violich, who has been practicing medicine for about 20 years.

The new system is the result of cooperation among several health organizations.

The Watsonville Health Center and other so-called "safety net" clinics serving low-income people in Santa Cruz are among the 21 clinics in the Oregon Community Health Information Network.

Each clinic by itself was too small to interest a technology vendor. By joining together, the clinics created an organization large enough to contract with Epic Care for electronic medical records. They pool their data to evaluate how they are serving patients, looking for ways to improve.

The clinics in the network got a new electronic system, EyePACS, developed for ophthalmologists by Dr. Jorge Cuadros and others at the UC Berkeley Optometric Eye Center. But it wasn't connected to the Epic Care system. So paper copies of the eye exam results had to be

created for every patient.

The Health Improvement Partnership of Santa Cruz County stepped in and worked with the Blue Shield Foundation, which provided \$25,000 to buy the digital camera and create an interface between the two electronic systems.

Two clinics in Santa Cruz County have a digital retinal camera: Salud Para La Gente and the Watsonville Health Center. Uninsured patients at the Santa Cruz Women's Health Center, the Planned Parenthood clinics and the county clinic on Emeline Avenue can get an eye exam at the Watsonville Health Center; results are sent to their doctor electronically.

The exam costs patients \$25; Dr. Patrick Monahan and Dr. Amr Dessouki of the Retinal Diagnostic Center in Watsonville donate part of their time to keep costs down.

Eleanor Littman of the Health Improvement Partnership said she hopes to locate a camera at the Emeline clinic to make it easier for uninsured patients with diabetes in North County to get a retinal exam.

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