

e-Everything

**By Reg P. Wydeven
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One of my favorite characters on 'Seinfeld' was Jerry's Uncle Leo, portrayed by the hilarious Len Lesser. Always ready with a "Jerry! Hello!", Leo is an eccentric fellow that Jerry describes as disgusting, bald, and paunchy with all kinds of sounds emanating from his body 24 hours a day.

In one classic episode, Leo's oven explodes and sings off his eyebrows. Elaine accompanies Leo to the doctor to hopefully find her own chart and erase some comments on it. Apparently, it indicates that she is a difficult patient since every doctor in New York City refuses to see her. Elaine tries to help Leo by drawing eyebrows on him, but she drew them pointed downward toward his nose. Thinking he was angry, Leo's doctor made a note in his chart and refused to treat him.

Thanks to the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, Elaine could no longer be able to modify her chart. The federal economic stimulus bill passed in February makes \$2 billion available immediately to help health care providers implement e-health records and to fund research into the use of health systems.

Electronic health systems utilize laptops throughout the building that are hooked into a network that contains electronic records for every patient, who are each individually bar-coded. Every aspect of a patient's chart will be recorded electronically, including all tests, all medications, all allergies and even doctor's notes about them being angry or difficult.

The government is encouraging health care providers to make the jump to e-health systems to hopefully reduce medical errors, decrease paperwork, and eliminate redundancies and other problems. The financial assistance from the stimulus bill is vital because experts estimate that because of the high costs associated with implementing an e-health system, less than 10% of American doctors have adopted such a system, with a slightly higher percentage of hospitals that have incorporated them.

The \$2 billion is available for loans and grants to help health care providers implement these electronic health records systems and to fund research into the use of various health systems. Additionally, the stimulus bill also provides more than \$17 billion for new programs rewarding doctors and hospitals over the next five years for the "meaningful" use of e-health records systems. The Secretary of Health is tasked with defining "meaningful."

To qualify for the stimulus funds, health care providers must use certified e-records products and e-prescriptions. Furthermore, the providers must be able to electronically exchange clinical data and report data about the quality of clinical care to government health agencies.

The stimulus package provides up to \$64,000 to a medical practice over a five-year period based upon the number of Medicare and Medicaid patients it treats, while hospitals could receive up to \$11.5 million. On the flip side, Medicare and Medicaid reimbursements to health care providers who do not adopt these e-health systems will be reduced by 1% per year from 2015 to 2018. The Secretary of Health will also have the power to assess an additional 1% penalty per year, up to 5%, for holdouts if less than 75% of providers nationwide are using e-health records by 2018.

So if you ever singe off your eyebrows, I hope your doctor is better than Uncle Leo's, and is actually listed in the phone book. Secondly, I hope your doctor will soon be implementing an e-health system.