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Regular e-communication with patients is 'inevitable'

By Debra Beaulieu

<http://www.freep.com/article/20110327/FEATURES01/103270355/Patients-physicians-turn-e-mail-Skype-texts-stay-touch>

As part of a quest to enhance customer service and communication with patients, healthcare providers are increasingly leveraging the power of technologies such as text messaging, email and Skype to confer with colleagues, patients and even distant patient family members.

"Certainly the explosion in the use of smartphones will mean more and more patients will be communicating with their healthcare providers using either e-mail or text messaging," oncologist Dr. Philip A. Philip of the Barbara Ann Karmanos Cancer Institute told the Detroit Free Press. "I feel that with improved communication options for patients and families, better care can be provided, and patient or family concerns addressed in a more timely fashion or in real time."

Smartphones have already changed the way busy clinicians collaborate to help patients. For example, Philip has used his cell phone to email a photo of a patient's hives--a suspected reaction to a medication--to other physicians handling the case.

Electronic interactions between physicians and patients, however, require planning to avert the problems that are nearly as prevalent as the issues they solve. In particular, providers need to make sure online communications are secure and do not take the place of necessary face-to-face visits.

"We need to see electronic messaging as a replacement for a phone call, not as a substitution for a visit," said pediatrician Dr. Matthew Davis, director of the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health at the University of Michigan.

Despite the challenges, many providers expect such e-communications to eventually become standard. "I think it's inevitable that physicians will move more toward it, if only because society expects and insists on it as the progressively dominant form of communication today," Davis said.

In addition to emailing with patients, Dr. Philip of Karmanos pointed out the value of using technology to involve patients' family members who may not be able to attend a consultation.

Dr. Marc Sakwa, chief of cardiovascular surgery at Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak, Mich., also uses WebEx to video chat with patients and/or caregivers who cannot be present at the facility. He told the newspaper that he has found the system especially helpful for talking with the adult children of elderly patients when those children live out of town.