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Physician participants sought for new Redwood MedNet system
By SETH FREEDLAND/The Daily Journal

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A new Ukiah-based organization mailed notices to all 200-plus doctors practicing in Mendocino and Lake counties Tuesday, in a move that will pave the way to a modern electronic referral network.

Using those respondents, Redwood MedNet, a nonprofit founded by local physicians and health technology professionals, aims to test a clinical message and document delivery system for healthcare providers. The proposed cost-effective clinical messaging system for Mendocino County understates the group's larger goal: to improve patients' health outcomes.

Will Ross, secretary of Redwood MedNet's board, said those doctors who respond will be asked to take part in the test phases of the project -- known as e-Referral -- now entering the year-and-a-half mark. The network is slated to be built between March and July.

"The key issue that rural communities face is that we are not like urban communities," Ross said. "You listen to conversations about those areas' hospitals -- it's wonderful to have those high broadband, enterprise data solution-integrated networks -- but we have solo practitioners and small hospitals."

The infrastructure created by the e-Referral network is "like building roads before people have cars," Ross admitted, but compared the progress to the advent of fax machines, now a staple of rural business. Mendocino County currently sits amid a two-decade transition, which started in the 1990s, moving medical records from paper to digital, Ross added.

The lack of a large integrated health care system geared for rural areas can hinder communication in communities of remotely situated providers, and thus the care itself. Clinical messaging was first developed in the early 1990s and is now widely used in Santa Cruz, Cincinnati, Indianapolis and other communities.

Concerns about rising costs for the electronic network do not concern Redwood MedNet, Ross said, noting a recent enterprise software vendor recently "burned" county doctors.

The group officially started in July 2004, when Carl Henning, a local doctor and now president of Redwood MedNet, convened a meeting of a technology steering committee to discuss how to improve participation by the local medical community in the emerging national health information environment. Redwood MedNet gained the title in May 2005 and nonprofit status that August.

The e-Referral project has three broad goals:

Include approximately two dozen local medical practices in the clinical messaging test

Build a cost model to pilot sustainable operation of the clinical messaging service

Publish user training materials

Respondents from the 200-doctor survey, which is financially supported by the Medical Society of Mendocino and Lake Counties, will pay nothing to participate in the e-Referral clinical messaging pilot. The network itself is funded by a grant from Blue Shield of California.

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