



Health Care Consumers Sought For Focus Groups

UNH Researchers Exploring Health Information Exchange In New Hampshire

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Health policy researchers at the University of New Hampshire are exploring how medical information technology can change – and improve – health care in New Hampshire. Because health care consumers' perspectives are vital to the way any technological advances are implemented, the researchers seek New Hampshire residents for focus groups.

To be considered as a participant in a small group discussion, health care consumers can fill out a form on the Citizen's Health Initiative web site at www.steppingupnh.org (under "documents"), or by calling 603-573-3373. Those selected for the 90-minute discussions will receive \$40 and a meal during the meeting. The signup period will be open through Feb. 4. Focus groups will be conducted at several locations throughout the state by mid-February.

"Business practices and policies are moving toward transparency in health care, with consumers demanding more access to financial and medical information. We must engage consumers in the design and development of the way their health records are handled so that we can maximize the benefits to the patient," says Amy Philbrick Schwartz, associate director of the New Hampshire Institute on Health Policy and Practice at UNH, which is leading the study for the Governor's Consumer Health Initiative.

The focus groups follow a UNH report, prepared for the Health Information Security and Privacy Collaboration of the Consumer Health Initiative, which found that there are no legal or business barriers to creating a seamless health information exchange among various providers. "The real issue is that we need to understand what consumers need to learn for them to be comfortable with health information exchange," says Schwartz. Health information exchange (HIE) would create a statewide health network that allows a patient's information to follow him or her from provider to provider, reducing medical errors, enhancing care coordination, and giving consumers better access to their own medical information.

"A senior's cardiologist could get up-to-date care information from the endocrinologist who is managing her diabetes, for instance," says Schwartz. "Or the Manchester resident who breaks his leg skiing at Loon Mountain would be treated by an emergency room doctor in Plymouth who already knows what prescription medications he takes."

Yet with enhanced exchange of information come risks, Schwartz notes, including the potential for patient information to be compromised. With consumer input via these focus groups, researchers hope to find a balance point between potential risks and benefits.