



Rx for diabetes management: Keep it simple

By Karl B. Hille
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BALTIMORE - What if keeping diabetes under control was as easy as text-messaging your friends?

Baltimore-based Welldoc Communications is testing a cell phone-based system that charts blood-sugar levels, sends that information securely to a doctor and provides instant feedback for the patient about how they can improve their health.

“Diabetes is incredibly complex for patients. It’s a real burden,” said Ryan Sysko, chief executive officer of Welldoc. “We’re trying to simplify diabetes management for patients, give them information when they need it and give them the confidence to manage diabetes.”

Patients using Welldoc’s platform reduced a measure called hemoglobin A1c — the amount of hemoglobin in red blood cells affected by high blood sugar over time — by an average of 2 percent, according to a pilot study published this month in the journal *Diabetes Technology and Therapeutics*.

Healthy individuals score about 5 percent, according to the American Diabetes Association Web site, while diabetics who don’t have their condition under control score above 7 percent.

Dr. Charlene Quinn, the University of Maryland Medical Center researcher leading the Welldoc trials, said ease of use and access were two key factors in the improvements they published.

“Using the cell phone to collect important clinical information about the patient’s diabetes also enables the patient to communicate in an easy fashion with their health care provider,” Quinn said. “And the physician receives just the amount of information they need to make a decision. They can see patterns of a patient’s daily blood sugar over a week or longer if they need it.”

The doctor can use that information to add a medication, reduce dosage or adjust the timing of insulin to better benefit the patient, she said, without adding significantly to their workload.

The Welldoc application could also save money in treating patients, through more efficient use of medications and fewer complications or side effects.

The savings — estimated at about \$1,500 per year for each patient — attracted CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield of Maryland, which is sponsoring a second, larger clinical trial. Currently 113 patients and 45 doctors are enrolled in the study, designed to follow 260 patients over 12 months.

Long-term benefits will probably require more than gee-whiz technology, Quinn said. “They have to say to themselves, ‘I’m going to have this the rest of my life. What should I try to adjust?’ That might include trying to lose some weight, getting some amount of exercise every day.”