

BloombergBusinessweek

News From Bloomberg

Diabetes Care Goes Mobile as App Aims to Monitor Disease

August 16, 2012
By Jeanna Smialek

Joseph Rihel, after struggling to manage his diabetes for more than a decade, learned to control the disease using a new tool: personalized coaching and monitoring via his mobile phone.

Rihel entered his glucose reading into the phone several times a day for a year to help test WellDoc Inc.'s DiabetesManager application. When the blood-sugar level was too low or high, the 69-year-old retiree received a return message with specific advice on adjusting his diet or medicine.

DiabetesManager is the only software medical device cleared by U.S. regulators for real-time Type 2 diabetes medication and treatment coaching in adults, said Chris Bergstrom, Baltimore-based WellDoc's chief strategy and commercial officer. As many as 300,000 diabetics served by health-care manager [Alere Inc. \(ALR\)](#) will have access to the service through a partnership with [AT&T Inc. \(T\)](#) announced Aug. 8. Such a tool may help blunt effects of the disease, which afflicts 25.8 million people in the U.S.



The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates one in three U.S. adults could come down with diabetes by 2050. Photographer: Cultura/Getty Images

"The object is not to let diabetes control you, but to control diabetes," said Rihel, of [Pasadena, Maryland](#), who was in a trial of the app four years ago.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates one in three U.S. adults could come down with diabetes by 2050. Diabetes is caused by the body's inability to use or produce the hormone insulin, which converts blood sugar into energy.

Alere fell 1 cent to close at \$18.73 in New York trading.

Dire Consequences

Improper management of a diabetic's insulin is prevalent and has dire consequences including blindness and amputation, said [Pamela Allweiss](#), a medical officer in the CDC's division of diabetes translation. Apps like DiabetesManager could help, Allweiss said.

"It's a wonderful way to reach people you might not have reached before," Allweiss said. "It's major technology."

DiabetesManager is one of a "handful" of medical apps cleared by the [Food and Drug Administration](#), Erica Jefferson, a spokeswoman for the agency, said in an e-mail. Approved apps include a smartphone-based ultrasound and an imaging app that lets health-care workers view such images as X-rays, she said.

Closely held WellDoc won approval for its app in 2010 and reached an agreement later that year to provide the service to AT&T's workers starting in 2011. Chicago-based insurer Health Care Service Corp. last year paired with AT&T to provide DiabetesManager for its employees.

Financial Details

Alere, based in Waltham, [Massachusetts](#), and AT&T declined to comment on the financial details of their agreement. Eleanor Chye, executive director of mobile health-care at Dallas-based AT&T, said her company invested significantly in the project.

The system provides patients with real-time medical coaching through a medical software system equipped with WellDoc-designed, clinical standard-based automated feedback, Bergstrom said. With the Alere partnership, it will also send data back to case managers at the company who can call or send messages to patients for additional coaching, he said.

“There is a correlation between control and reducing complications,” said Matt Petersen, managing director of medical information for the [American Diabetes Association](#).

“There is every reason for people to be using these new tools, he said. While some people are able to maintain healthy routines using other methods, “any tools that help people with diabetes manage their diabetes better are a good thing,” Petersen said.

WellDoc’s Bergstrom declined to say how much the company charges for the DiabetesManager app and how many people it wants to cover. The service will only be available through health-care management providers and companies, so employers usually would pay for it, he said.

“It’s really ready for wider distribution,” Bergstrom said. “We are talking to most of the disease management companies and a couple of large employers.”

Rihel, the diabetic retiree, said DiabetesManager taught him how to maintain a healthy blood-sugar level. “By the end of the trial I knew how to control my diabetes,” he said.