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WellDoc Could Become A Much-Needed Tool In The Fight Against Diabetes

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A study co-authored by Yale cardiologist Harlan Krumholz and published this month in the *New England Journal of Medicine* pans remote monitoring. It showed that cardiac patients, who reported their symptoms and weight over the phone, were no better off than those receiving usual care.

Ryan Sysko, a founder and CEO of WellDoc begs to differ. The Baltimore-based company plans to launch in early 2011 a FDA-approved phone-based diabetes management software. Like other monitoring devices, patients input their blood sugar level, get alerts if it's high or low, and chart it on a computer over several months to detect trends.

WellDoc goes a step further. Its algorithm tells patients what to do. If patients are struggling with low blood sugar because they are having trouble counting the recommended amount of carbohydrates, it provides information on how to do it. It suggests drinking half a cup of apple juice, or eating 3 to 5 hard candies. Patients input additional data, including blood pressure, cholesterol, and medications. The information is sent directly to WellDoc's servers. Software analyzes the data, suggests an evidence-based treatment, and the company sends it to the patient's primary care doctor—not endocrinologist. "It's the next generation of mobile health solutions," says Bruce Ahern, chief marketing officer of Entra Health Systems, which sells glucose meters. Entra is working with WellDoc to integrate data with a mobile phone.



Doctors will play a pivotal role in how well WellDoc will do. The company's diabetes app will be incomplete, without their participation. For example, WellDoc can't ask a patient to adjust the dosage of a diabetes drug, without a doctor's approval. They also have to be willing to review WellDoc's recommendations. Sysko recognizes that without compensation, there won't be much of an incentive. He is talking to insurance companies about coding and coverage. "[They] have to be behind it," he says.

The impetus is there. According to UnitedHealth Group, the cost of diabetes could hit \$3.4 trillion by 2020. Providing patients with tools that allow them to custom-tailor their drug intake, diet and exercise, could help reduce costs.

WellDoc just submitted for peer review (it won't disclose which publication) the results of a one-year clinical trial it conducted on 163 type 2 diabetes patients. Those who used WellDoc had a 1.87% drop in A1c (the average blood sugar level for the past three months), compared to 0.5% in the control group—that's pretty significant. (Interestingly, most of the primary care doctors involved in the study chose to have WellDoc fax them the results, instead of emailing them).

Dr. Krumholz's main contention is that folks in telemonitoring have made overly promising claims based on small studies. AT&T is about to find that out. It has partnered with WellDoc to sell the diabetes software, and early next year some of its quarter million employees will test it.

At least one patient is convinced of WellDoc's benefits. Stewart Greenebaum was a patient of WellDoc founder Suzanne Sysko, an endocrinologist at the University of Maryland, and Ryan's sister. For ten years, Greenebaum struggled with a high A1c. Within 60 days, he was able to lower it significantly with the help of WellDoc. He became the company's largest angel investor, providing the bulk of the \$17 million WellDoc has raised.