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Convention focuses on technology to help patients

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By Linda Shrieves

Technology that will change the patient — and doctor — experience is on display at the **Orange County Convention Center** this week, as hundreds of companies converge there to preview their wares.

While many vendors focused on software to secure patient records and various computer platforms, there also were eye-catching gadgets everyone could understand — from washable computer keyboards to a communications device for **nurses** that looks and acts like the communicator badge on "Star Trek."

The Health Information Management Systems Society convention, which started Sunday and wraps up today, attracted 31,000 attendees to talk about how doctors, hospitals and patients handle data. Since the Obama administration began providing incentives for doctors and hospitals to adopt computerized records systems, the health-care technology industry has been booming.

"The five biggest companies in health IT [information technology] are all American," **Kathleen Sebelius**, secretary of the **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**, told conventioners Wednesday morning. "Over the last 10 years, their work forces have grown nearly 600 percent."

In an interview afterward, Sebelius said she thinks U.S. companies have an edge because of the stimulus provided by the government. "Every health minister around the world is watching what we're doing," Sebelius said. "I think the potential is huge."

Out on the floor of the convention center, Jim Traficant and his team from **Harris Corp.** showed off a software system that allows doctors to receive patient information on an **iPhone**, switch to an **iPad** and even view a patient's X-rays at home using a specialized monitor. That system also allows a doctor to send a prescription to a pharmacy via a smart phone or an iPad. And to alert other doctors the patient has seen about his status. And to simultaneously transfer that information to the patient's records.

Although Melbourne-based Harris made its name providing software and computer systems to federal agencies such as the Department of Defense, Traficant says the company — which launched its health-care division four years ago — will be a major player in health care in the coming years.

"In 10 years, health care will be a fundamental part of who we are," said Traficant, general manager of Harris Healthcare Solutions.

For the patients

Doctors and nurses weren't the only targets of gee-whiz technology. AT&T showed off its WellDoc **Diabetes** Manager system, which allows diabetic patients to plug their blood-glucose readings into their **cell phones**. The phone will alert them if they need to eat to raise their blood sugar and even will provide food suggestions. It also reminds patients when it's time to recheck their blood glucose and will send alerts to the doctor if those numbers are erratic.

Several companies, including Philips, are jumping into the home health-care market, introducing wireless blood-pressure monitors, weight scales and oxygen sensors that patients can use at home. That information is then sent back to the doctor's office via a cell phone or a base unit plugged into a phone

line.

For those wandering the convention floor in search of the unusual, there were a few gems.

For instance, not far from **Google** Health's display sat a smaller exhibit: a dishwasher stuffed with a variety of keyboards, computer mice and even TV remote controls.

"You need to be able to wash keyboards — to prevent cross-contamination in hospitals," said Scott Fillion of Jacksonville-based Seal Shield.

The keyboards, he said, are good for as many as 2,000 washings. They've proved popular not just with hospitals and doctor's offices, but also with the **U.S. military**, which recently ordered several thousand to send to Iraq, where the sand can be washed out of them.

A few hundred yards away, Vocera was showing off its "Star Trek"-style communicator badges, which nurses can use to contact anyone in the hospital.

"A typical nurse walks six miles a day," said Vocera president Brent Lang. "With our system, she walks three to four miles a day. Now she can spend more time on patients and less time looking for people."

Lang added one note that is music to any hospital patient's ears — using the "communicators" eliminates the need for most of those middle-of-the night pages that wake up sleeping patients.