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## Medical records going electronic this year

Thousands of Treasure Valley patients and businesses will experience the transition to electronic medical records this year. Saint Alphonsus Health System is leading the way in EMRs. That health system, which includes four hospitals in Idaho and Oregon, adopted a multi-million-dollar EMR system last October.



St. Luke's Health System, the larger of the two, with nine locations in Idaho, is still in the planning phase of its EMR adoption. The planning will continue through 2011, said spokesman Ken Dey.

*Andrea Grohs, an ICU nurse at St. Alphonsus, accesses patient information via computer.*

Hospitals have until 2014 to phase in their EMRs under the federal law that offers incentives to health providers for computerizing records.

Saint Alphonsus got an earlier start with help from its parent company, the 47-hospital Trinity Health in Michigan. Trinity has carried out dozens of EMR conversions in the last 10 years around the country, said Robert Polk, the hospital's chief

quality officer. Trinity sent hundreds of technicians to Boise to help with the transition at Saint Alphonsus.

"It was amazingly beneficial" to have those workers on hand to answer questions, Polk said. "We had at-the-elbow support 24-7."

So what difference will electronic records make to the businesses and individuals who work with these health systems?

They should see greater efficiency, said Polk. That's the whole point of making the transition to medical records: fewer duplicated tests, and fewer hours spent hunting for lost files.

"The patients will never again hear from their clinicians, 'excuse me while I go hunt for your chart.' It just won't happen," Polk said. "That saves an incredible amount of time for the doctor or nurse."

But he noted duplicate testing won't go away altogether.

"Sometimes at the bedside, clinicians want to update or redo a test because time has passed, 24 hours has passed, a week has passed, and the patient has changed," Polk said. "So I don't think we really know how it all is going to look."

It also remains to be seen how well the record-keeping system at St. Luke's will communicate with the record-keeping system at Saint Alphonsus. Neither one appears to have made that a priority. Polk said clinicians with privileges in both systems should have no problem.

Meanwhile, the health information is becoming increasingly available through the [Idaho Health Data Exchange](#), a Boise non-profit corporation that includes St. Luke's and Saint Alphonsus among its members.

The Idaho Health Data Exchange makes health records available to the professionals who use them. Patients can opt out if they are worried about privacy. Some providers are enrolled in the system; some aren't yet.

“Theoretically a patient can come into a doctor's office and say, ‘I had an X-ray done at St. Luke's or Saint Al's,’ and the doctor can log into the health data exchange and pull up the report,” Polk said. “For clinical decision-making, clinicians need information, and the more the information is readily available, the quicker the clinical decision-making will be.”