

Idaho Falls Post Register, Friday, Dec. 18, 2009 – by Nick Draper

Madison hospital set to go digital

REXBURG -- Paper records at Madison Memorial Hospital will soon be a thing of the past. The hospital is set to receive a \$350,000 federal grant to expand and improve its use of electronic medical records. The money will allow hospital staff to buy equipment, such as servers and computers, that will eventually lead to a paperless environment in which all medical records are stored in a digital format and can be transmitted to doctors' offices.

"We'll be able to quit using charts now," said Sandra Johnson, Madison Memorial's director of health information management.

The hospital's digital transition actually started last year when its laboratory and radiology departments started using a paperless record system. Nurses and other staff followed suit this spring, and emergency room doctors are next in line to convert to all-digital record keeping. "It's been a gradual process," said Sharon Pirente, executive director of the hospital's foundation.

Because of its digital transition, Madison Memorial has been able to communicate via the Internet with larger hospital across the country. In one instance, a patient arrived in Rexburg who was previously admitted to the Mayo Clinic.

Because the patient's medical records were in a digital format, her doctor at the Mayo Clinic and her doctor in Madison County were able to both view the same record and communicate quickly for the benefit of the patient, Pirente said. But what's been missing is that type of connectivity with local doctors. That's a reality now that the federal grant is coming, Pirente said. "It's making it so we can be integrated," she said.

Madison Memorial is just one of many hospitals in Idaho and across the nation that are making the switch to digital records in an attempt to curb administrative costs.

Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center has used an electronic medical records system for years and is part of a group of Idaho hospitals trying to establish a data exchange.

"That holds the promise of eliminating redundant tests, unnecessary administration between payers and providers, and medical errors based on two providers of the same patient not knowing what is in each other's records," said Cindy Smith-Putnam, EIRMC's director of community relations and marketing.

This is the third and final year that federal grants will be helping Madison Memorial go digital. Although the \$350,000 will help, there's still a lot more work that needs to be done, Pirente said. "It sounds like a lot of money, but when you're talking about technology, it doesn't get you very far," she said. "This is a multimillion-dollar process."