

Private health sector urged to digitise records

It is holding back the national health record database, says Gan Kim Yong

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The private health sector is again being urged to speed up digitising patients' health records and be part of a national scheme to share patient information with other doctors when needed.

Speaking at the National Health IT Summit, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong made it clear that the complete implementation of the National Electronic Health Records (NEHR) database is being held back by the private sector. "We need to go further and faster," said Mr Gan, pushing for the private and charity sectors to "come on board the NEHR".

The database, launched in 2011, allows healthcare professionals to quickly and easily access patients' medical history, from drug allergies to pre-existing conditions, and the outstanding medical appointments the patients have.

This sharing of information will let healthcare providers meet patients' demands more effectively, reduce duplicate testing and prevent adverse drug interactions. While it already has all the public sector patient data, NEHR lacks the bulk of patient information from the private sector.

The charity sector can get financial help and, so far, more than \$2 million has been given out to it over the past two years, Mr Gan added.

He wants to use IT to change the landscape of the healthcare sector by harnessing technology in innovative and effective ways - including using robots to provide home-based care.

"Disruption can sometimes be painful. The workforce will have to adapt to new ways of carrying out their jobs," said Mr Gan. "But if the disruptions have the potential to bring about meaningful benefits to patients and their families, and to our healthcare system, we must not be afraid to allow them to take place."

A key advantage of IT is the large amount of data available, allowing doctors to identify better or more cost-effective treatments. He gave the example of the National University Health System, which identified cost-effective clinical practices, reduced unnecessary variations and improved both cost and clinical outcomes.

In the case of total knee replacements, for instance, it was able to reduce the number of patients requiring blood transfusions from 26 per cent of cases to 3 per cent, resulting in savings of \$955 per case with no drop in the quality of care.

Singapore embarked on its Health IT Master Plan (Hitmap) in 2014, and much has already been put in place. Other IT innovations already in use include automated pharmacy systems that pack medicines with fewer errors than if done by humans, and telerehab, where patients are monitored remotely.

Later this year, the Vital Signs Monitoring system will be launched to bring care beyond hospitals to the community and the home.

It will enable the remote monitoring of vital signs such as blood pressure, blood glucose or weight of patients with conditions such as hypertension, diabetes and heart or pulmonary diseases.

"Patients can in turn receive more timely advice and intervention to manage their conditions without having to schedule an appointment to visit the hospital," Mr Gan told the audience at the Singapore Expo.

He expects the system to "enable more regular monitoring, improve patient management and reduce hospital visits and readmissions".

Patients being cared for at home could have robots helping to look after them in future. Such robotic aid will start in hospitals, but could be extended to home care later, Mr Gan said.

The ministry is developing prototypes "of smart wards integrated with smart logistics for what we hope will be hospitals of the future", he said.

He added: "In line with the shift beyond hospitals to the community, we will also look into robotics-assisted home care."

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Pharmacy technicians picking up baskets containing medication for patients at the front counter delivered by a new automated system at the Singapore General Hospital's outpatient pharmacy. The system is among new IT innovations in the healthcare sector. ST FILE PHOTO

S'pore 'on track to have one of world's most IT-enabled healthcare systems'



DON'T FEAR DISRUPTION

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HEALTH MINISTER GAN KIM YONG, on using IT to change the landscape of the healthcare sector.

NEED TO ACHIEVE MORE

We need to go further and faster.



MR GAN, urging private and charity sectors to digitise their records and come on board the NEHR database.

Singapore is on track to having one of the most IT-enabled healthcare systems in the world, said Mr Bruce Liang, chief executive officer of Integrated Health Information Systems (IHIS).

He was speaking to the media on Monday, ahead of the National Health IT Summit yesterday.

Mr Liang, the head of the Ministry of Health Holdings' information technology company, said yesterday at the summit that the advent of IT is inevitable, and urged the audience of 600 to "get on or get run over".

By 2021, when the Health IT Masterplan is completed, patients, doctors and healthcare providers will all be hooked up in a vast electronic database.

Conditions of patients with complex chronic ailments can be easily monitored in their homes and, if intervention is needed, this can be quickly provided so the patient does not end up in hospital.

All citizens will have access to their health records, either on their mobiles or computers. These records will make it easy for any doctor they see to know their medical histories and treatments.

Patients who need a nurse to help, for example, to change a catheter or wound dressing, will be able to get one through an app.

When there are changes in healthcare subsidies - for example, the subsidy given during the bad haze days in 2015 - general practitioners should have the information updated immediately in their clinic computers.

Some of these enablers are already available. For example, last month, IHIS started a programme at public hospitals to identify patients at high risk of needing to be readmitted.

These patients are given better post-hospital support to prevent their conditions from deteriorating and requiring hospital care. It has already identified 2,500 patients



At Changi General Hospital, a robot called Hospi has been used as a porter as part of IT innovations in the healthcare sector, under the Health IT Masterplan. The National Electronic Health Records database - where a person's medical records are shared among all public health institutes and some private ones - is another of the innovations. ST FILE PHOTO

who need the extra care.

They are identified using over 1,000 indicators, including age and frequency of admission, and length of hospital stay. Mr Liang said it has a 70 per cent precision rate, which is among the best in the world.

The National Electronic Health Records, where a person's medical records are shared among all public health institutes as well as some private ones like community hospitals, is already available.

However, it is not yet comprehensive as it lacks the majority of data from private healthcare.

Once completed, it will make it easy for patients to move from primary to tertiary care throughout the country as any doctor treating

the patients would have full access to their medical records.

With a large database, the system will also be able to pick out treatments that work better. Such information can be shared to provide better quality care.

Frail patients can use their mobile phone app to "order" a nurse for a house visit, a medical escort or healthcare supplies like diapers, or even meals and personal care such as a haircut at home.

Mr Liang gave the assurance that the system has many layers of security built into it to ensure it cannot be hacked into, so confidentiality will not be an issue.

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