

Web service allows hospital patients to connect with loved ones

by Dean Olsen

It takes Jim McCaslin seven hours to drive to his daughter's home in Michigan, but a free online service called CarePages kept him closer to her as she and her family dealt with two recent medical crises.

DOT-COMMUNICATION - Beth Spiekermeier of Hamilton, Ill., uses the CarePages Web site at St. John's Hospital to keep friends and family updated on the progress of her pregnancy. CNS Photo by Justin L. Fowler. "It made me feel more involved, and I got more complete information," the Auburn resident said of the service, which allows friends and relatives to use the World Wide Web to interact with a virtual diary posted by a patient and his or her family.

McCaslin, 68, a retired fire chief who volunteers at Memorial Medical Center in Springfield, Ill., said he's glad that Memorial plans to help its patients use the service, too. Memorial and St. John's Children's Hospital in Springfield both recently began offering CarePages.

"Without bombarding a family with phone calls, it's a way to keep updated on that patient's care," said Peggy Curtin, executive director of the children's hospital.

Memorial launched the service hospitalwide and will promote it to all its patients, said Val Floyd, Memorial's manager of clinical operations.

"I think it's going to be tremendously popular," she said.

CarePages, operated by Chicago-based TLContact, serves 550 hospitals and other health-care providers.

Patients who sign up through the hospitals' Web sites create CarePages that carry the hospitals' logos. New visitors then receive e-mailed welcome letters from the hospitals.

But any patient or family - regardless of whether they have been served recently by a hospital that contracts with CarePages - can set up a CarePage for free at www.carepages.com, said Erin McDaniel, marketing manager for TLContact.

What sets CarePages apart is that it lets patients limit who has access to their pages.

Patients can send e-mails from their CarePage to invite people to the site. Visitors sign in with a user name and password and can share the patient's CarePage name with as many others as they like, but the patient or family can refuse access to unwelcome visitors.

McDaniel said the service saves time for hospital workers, who often are barred by privacy laws from divulging sensitive information to people who call to check on a patient's condition.

Families can also avoid multiple phone calls at every turn in a patient's case. The service can automatically alert visitors when there's a new posting.

A CarePage established for Jim McCaslin's 7-year-old granddaughter, Julia Combes, kept him abreast of the girl's condition when she received open-heart surgery last year in Michigan.

His daughter, Karen, 43, later used her daughter's CarePage to keep loved ones posted on her own battle with breast cancer.

Families can use CarePages at Memorial through personal computers the hospital provides in waiting areas. Patients and families also can bring in their own laptops.

Curtin said it takes only about 10 minutes for pediatric patients or their families to set up CarePages. St. John's provides personal computer stations and loans out laptops to patients.

Beth Spiekermeier, 23, a Hancock County lab technician expecting twins, has spent three weeks in St. John's during her high-risk pregnancy. She set up her own CarePage through a wireless connection while sitting on her hospital bed Tuesday.

"It was pretty user-friendly," she said. "It's almost like a blog where you can say, 'Hey, this is what happened today.' It's a good way to update everybody all at once."

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