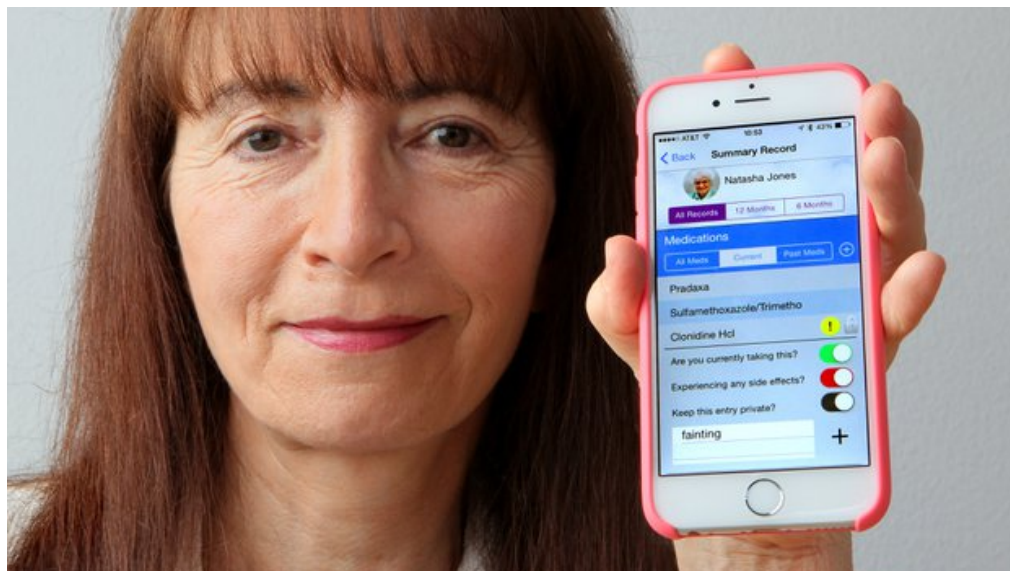


Health records in your hands

Humetrix is among tech firms giving patients access to their medical records

By [Mike Freeman](#) [\(/staff/mike-freeman/\)](#) 12:36 p.m. June 19, 2015



Humetrix Chief Executive Bettina Experton with the Del Mar company's iBlueButton app that lets Medicare beneficiaries and others manage their summary health records on mobile devices. — *Charlie Neuman*

Beth Schindele has seen firsthand why patients should keep their fingers on the pulse of their own medical records.

She is a caregiver for her elderly father. As he was being discharged from the hospital, a nurse brought a tray full of pills for him to take, including a blood thinner.

Schindele told the nurse that her father was no longer using blood thinning medication. Hospital records from previous admissions, however, showed that he was. The nurse was skeptical.

So Schindele pulled up her father's summary medical records on the iBlueButton smartphone app from Del Mar-based Humetrix.

Tapping into Medicare data, iBlueButton showed that the blood thinner prescription hadn't been refilled for more than two years. Her father left the hospital without it.

Later at home, he fell, lacerating his arm and head.

"Had he been on that blood thinning medication, I don't know if a first responder would have been able to get there fast enough," Schindele said in an interview. "He could have bled out."

Schindele sees the incident as an example of the importance of patient access to their health records. She has used iBlueButton to avoid a redundant MRI for her father. She checked for errors after the app revealed dozens of doctors billed Medicare for one of father's hospital stays.

"We like to think the doctor has all the pertinent information about us at their fingertips, but that is not the case right now," said Schindele, who advises physicians on health information technology for the Delaware Regional Extension Center. "So to me, we have to have our data. We have to know what's going on."

Patients carrying around their digital health records is uncommon today. The health care industry is still acclimating to the sweeping transition from paper to electronic medical records — a \$30.8 billion Obama administration initiative to get health care providers to go digital.

For now, hospitals, clinics, pharmacies and specialists are striving to get their electronic records systems to share information with each other — sometimes through secure, private Health Information Exchange networks such as the San Diego Health Connect. The organization has created the technology backbone for record-sharing among many health care providers in the San Diego region.

The next step in this digital transition is giving patients easy electronic access to their medical records — which are often scattered at different specialists and clinics.

Humetrix, founded by physician Bettina Experton in 1990, is among the group of technology companies working to make digital medical records easier to access for patients. Others include Microsoft's HealthVault, WebMD's Personal Health Record and www.NoMoreClipboard.com.

The concept is simple: Patients own their medical records. If they have them, they can use the information to stay healthier and cut costs.

"We are just in the early stages, but every study that looked at it shows that patients have a much-higher engagement level, a better sense of well-being. They clearly feel an advantage by having their information," said Dr. Eric Topol, chief medical officer for Scripps Health and author of "The Patient Will See You Now: The Future of Medicine is in Your Hands," which examines how digital technology will democratize health care.

Nearly two years ago, federal rules took effect that gave Americans the right to obtain electronic copies of their health records.

Humetrix has built mobile apps such as iBlueButton that bring these records securely to Apple and Android smartphones and tablets.

Yet, at least for now, many providers have opted to make electronic records available to patients through their own password-protected website portals to meet the federal requirement.

"It is something they can use in conjunction with their electronic health record that allows them to put patient information online to make it easier for the patient to access," said Lesley Kadlec, a director at American Health Information Management Association. "Some of the portals are comprehensive, and some are a little limited."

Humetrix, which is self-funded and employs about 20 workers, claims that many of these portals allow patients to see their records, but not download them.

If there is download capability, it is usually in a PDF document format designed for printing, according to the company.

Experton believes carrying a paper record into the doctor's office is not as useful as having that record on a smartphone, where it can be updated automatically.

"Clearly, electronic access to health records would be best provided on the very mobile devices that most of us carry at all times," she said.

Humetrix's iBlueButton allows patient health records data to be downloaded to the phone. Tools on the app give users control over who sees the data. The app costs \$10 on Apple's App store and Google Play. So far, just under 100,000 people have downloaded the app, according to Humetrix.

Doctor visits, lab tests, prescriptions and a host of other summary health data are displayed on iBlueButton. The app has won three innovation awards from the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology.

It works with the federal Blue Button program deployed by Veterans Affairs, Department of Defense's Tricare health system and a few private electronic health-record systems. In addition, Medicare beneficiaries can get three years of claims records on their phone with iBlueButton.

The app automatically decodes Medicare records and displays them in common language and user-friendly format. It links to records on MyMedicare.gov password-protected accounts and downloads them to phones. It also provides links to additional consumer-level information — such as medication descriptions. And it gives users the phone numbers and addresses of billing physicians.

Though iBlueButton works with the VA, Tricare and Medicare, there are no guarantees that every health care provider could give the app access to its electronic medical-records system.

Patients would have to request it, and the provider must have an electronic medical records system that uses a standardized record-sharing protocol called Direct. Most large electronic medical records software systems include the Direct protocol to adhere to government regulations.

San Diego Health Connect, the secure network for sharing records between local providers, has tested iBlueButton in three pilot projects. They showed the app works, is easy to use and is consistent with the security and technology requirements of its network, said Daniel Chavez, Health Connect's executive director.

Humetrix is betting that it's just a matter of time before more providers outside of the VA, Tricare and Medicare see the value in allowing patients to download their records to mobile devices.

The company has four apps on the market — iBlueButton, ICEBlueButton, SOS QR and Tensio. ICEBlueButton, which stands for “In Case of Emergency,” lets users share specific information with first responders and alerts loved ones in an emergency. SOS QR also shares medical information in case of emergencies, and sends email alerts and location information to a user's emergency contacts.

Humetrix's latest application, Tensio, could be a glimpse of the future.

The \$4 app is designed to help manage high blood pressure, which affects 76 million Americans. Tensio was among the first apps launched with the Apple Watch in April.

Tensio reads data from Apple HealthKit devices such as blood pressure monitors, weight scales and exercise trackers. It then applies algorithms with hypertension clinical guidelines to alert users on their iPhone or Apple Watch how they are doing in managing their hypertension.

The app also reads data from other Humetrix apps, such as iBlueButton. So it can tell users if medications they're taking for other conditions could be raising their blood pressure.

Humetrix plans to introduce additional mobile apps to help patients manage other chronic conditions, such as diabetes, asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

These are the types of tools expected to emerge so patients can make sense their health data — not only from their medical records but also from sophisticated sensors that consumers will increasingly use outside the traditional health care system, say experts.

These sensors will go well beyond today's fitness trackers — recording such things as oxygen level during sleep, glucose and lung function. The data will flow not to the doctor but to the individual, said Topol of Scripps Health.

“The way this is going to work is, someday — I don't know exactly when — patients will go to their doctor and their doctor will ask, “Will you be willing to share your data with me?” he said. “We are basically going to have this breakout because people-generated data are going to supersede doctor/hospital owned data rather quickly.”

© Copyright 2015 The San Diego Union-Tribune. All rights reserved.