

Microsoft Takes the Plunge Into Health Care IT

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Software invented by and for emergency physicians has inspired Microsoft to jump into the medical information technology arena.

Microsoft has purchased Azyxxi (rhymes with "trixie"), a program developed by emergency physicians Dr. Craig Feied and Dr. Mark Smith at the Washington Hospital Center.

The partnership with Microsoft shows the leadership role that emergency departments continue to play in hospitals as a whole, said Dr. Jonathan A. Handler, director of development at the National Institute for Medical Informatics in Washington.

The Azyxxi system was built on a Microsoft technology platform, and Microsoft plans to make the product available

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to other hospital systems and to invest in research and development of the product.

"We are buying the Azyxxi technology because we believe in the vision and path of its developers—to improve health care delivery using unique and

powerful information technology," a Microsoft spokesperson said in an interview.

Azyxxi's successful 10-year track record was a strong selling point. Since its debut at the Washington Hospital Center in 1996, its developers said, the software has dramatically improved patient care in the seven Washington-area hospitals that use it. The hospitals are operated by MedStar Health, a nonprofit group.

"Data don't fall through the cracks, and people can manage much more complex situations," said Dr. Feied, professor of emergency medicine at Georgetown University and director of the National Institute for Medical Informatics.

Azyxxi was not designed to replace or compete with other medical software systems, Dr. Feied said. Instead, it unifies all the preexisting software in a hospital.

Azyxxi accesses separate caches of information from any hospital software, no matter how old or new, and delivers the information to one computer in less than a second. Physicians can compare current clinical information with a patient's history almost immediately.

Improved data access translates into improved patient care.

In the emergency department setting, quick and easy access to information thanks to Azyxxi has allowed physicians to move patients out of the waiting room and treat, admit, or discharge them within a few hours, rather than half a day, Dr. Feied said.

"Azyxxi was born in an emergency department, but it is now utilized hospital-wide," said Dr. Handler, who has worked on Azyxxi with Dr. Feied for the past few

years. "Not everything transfers, but there are a lot of important lessons we learned in the emergency department that are equally applicable throughout the rest of the hospital," he said.

The first steps under the Microsoft umbrella will be to get the software out to other institutions and to augment it and make it even more powerful, Dr. Handler said. Widespread distribution of the Azyxxi software also will help more emergency departments address the challenges

documented in an Institute of Medicine report earlier this year, he added.

"We recognized early on, before 9/11, there is the risk of emerging disease and bioterrorism, and events that could overwhelm hospitals and emergency departments, as well as more mundane but worrisome trends, such as the shortage of nurses," Dr. Handler said.

From a practical standpoint, widespread availability of a software system that anyone can walk in and use immediately makes a

huge difference in a crisis. And easy access to patient information will help smaller emergency departments in rural or underserved areas if they are suddenly faced with 2,000 patients instead of their usual 20.

Dr. Feied and Dr. Handler will become Microsoft employees in addition to their other credentials once the deal is finalized.

"The opportunity to have the largest software company in the world standing behind us is tremendously energizing," Dr. Feied said. ■

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