

HEALTH BLOG

September 5, 2007, 8:56 am

Columbia Docs Enter Computer Age

Posted by Theo Francis

By some counts, only about 20% of doctors use computerized medical records in their practices. But in New York, a particular laggard, a bunch of physicians are about to jump on board.



[Columbia University Medical Center](#) (pictured) says it will roll out electronic health records for use by its 1,200 full-time faculty doctors and eventually for another 1,000 or so independent physicians.

They'll be using a system from [Allscripts](#) that will let them write prescriptions, share patient charts, order tests, view scans and lab results. The first doctors will start using it this year, but it could take two years or more for most to be up and running. The hospital signed a 10-year contract that will bring Allscripts a little more than \$10 million.

Columbia officials acknowledge that the biggest challenges may lie ahead: Getting doctors to switch to computers. Studies suggest physicians can spend as much as a quarter of their time getting up to speed with new electronic record systems.

With that in mind, Columbia enlisted a panel of 25 specialists to help it pick out the software. "That doesn't mean everyone's going to be an enthusiastic user in the beginning," Richard U. Levine, president of Columbia's faculty practice organization, told the Health Blog from vacation in [Hermanus](#), near the southern tip of South Africa. But he's confident that "at some point there'll be a critical mass."

Columbia took its time jumping into the electronic age, which may turn out to be an advantage. Health-technology watchers say medical-records technology has gotten a lot better recently, and hospital boards holding the purse strings have become convinced that electronic records will improve care, said John Halamka, chief medical information officer for Harvard Medical School and Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston. Plus, Congress recently eased anti-kickback rules, letting hospitals contribute up to 85% of doctors' cost for installing the systems. Several hospitals in the Boston area are "in the process of rolling this out now," Halamka said. "I would say they're at the sweet spot."

But some say computerized systems may still not be much better than paper records in making a dent in health-care cost and quality, as this Health Blog [this post](#) describes.