

Parents Barred From Teen Health Files

Privacy Laws for Adolescents Thwart Efforts to Expand Electronic Medical Records

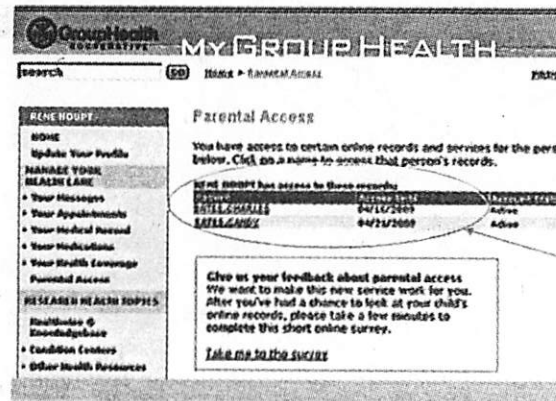
By LAURA LANDRO

USING HER HEALTH PLAN's Web site, Urula Scott of Seattle can view the medical records of her 2- and 5-year-old daughters, check their immunization schedules, look up test results, exchange emails with a pediatrician, and make appointments for the next office visit.

But when it comes to her 16-year-old stepson, no one in the family can gain access to any aspect of his electronic medical records—including the teen himself.

In the long-running effort to balance the rights of parents and adolescents in making decisions about medical care, technology has opened up a thicket of new legal and technical issues. The result is that teens are being left out of one of the most important advances in the administration of health care today.

A growing number of health plans, hospitals and doctor's offices are making the switch to electronic medical-record systems, in response to the Bush administration's push to make online records available to all Americans within the next decade. Such systems, like the one run by **Group Health Cooperative of Seattle**, which covers the Scott family, offer more than just convenience. They hold the promise of faster



Access Denied: Group Health alerts parents to when they will lose access to a child's online records.

sharing of vital medical information, reduction of medical errors and more control for consumers over their care.

But with teens, these efforts risk running afoul of a complex patchwork of federal and state laws that allow adolescents to seek confidential family-planning and mental-health services without their parents' consent. Such laws make certain aspects of teens' health records off-limits to parents. However, electronic medical-records systems don't yet have a foolproof way to flag confidential material and hide it from parents—something that can more-easily be done with paper records. And as minors, teens cannot on their own enter into the security agreements required to grant access to their online records.

Until providers can figure out how to give parents access to basic health-care information for a child, without breaking confidentiality or access rules, many are leaving adolescents out of new electronic medical-records systems altogether—and revoking parental access to children's records as soon as they turn 13.

"Parents are often floored to learn that when their kid turns 13 they are still responsible for them but they can't know certain things about them," says Maureena Moran, who oversees the parental access program for Group Health.

Families still have access to paper versions of a teen's nonconfidential records, including immunizations, treatment for chronic conditions such as diabetes, and general medical care. But without access to electronic records, teens miss out on a host of benefits, including secure email messaging with their doctors.

A number of efforts are under way to find solutions. The American Academy of Pediatrics is currently revising its policy on patient rights and privacy protections for minors, to address electronic-medical-records issues. And software developers are working on more-sophisticated records systems. Group Health in Seattle hopes by next year to offer a modified version of an adolescent online health record that will allow parents to view standard nonconfidential health data, and let teens use some services such as refilling prescriptions online, says Group Health Associate Medical Director Ted Eytan.

One of the nation's largest health plans, **Kaiser Permanente**, is making electronic medical

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