

S.D. Firms Discuss Future of Wireless Health in D.C.

San Diego Business Journal

San Diego — With the digital dialogue between patient and provider promising brave new worlds and opportunities in health care and commerce, face-to-face meetings drew representatives from several San Diego startup medical device companies and a medical research organization advocating for wireless health initiatives to the nation's capital last week.

Hosted by the La Jolla-based West Wireless Health Institute, Health Care Innovation Day targeted lawmakers and policymakers in Washington, D.C. The Oct. 12 conference was a way to reach high-level players that will have a say in the acceleration of wireless health therapies, especially on the reimbursement side.

"It's been our agenda since inception to work more aggressively in a positive policy environment," explained Don Casey, chief executive officer of the institute, who pronounced the event a success.

"It was a great opportunity to interact with policymakers and help them understand about health care innovation and what wireless solutions can do," said Casey, who estimated that 40 percent of the 300 attendees were from government agencies.

"We think this is the first of many planned for the future," said Casey, adding that the "moderate investment" was well worth it on the part of the institute. He said 28 exhibiting companies were on hand for the event, including San Diego-based CareFusion Corp., Humetrix Inc. and Sotera Wireless Inc.

Speakers included Aneesh Chopra, chief technology officer in the White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy. Top technology officers in several other federal agencies also appeared at the program — which featured moderated panels, round-table discussions and networking opportunities — at the Ronald Reagan Building.

Refining the Rules

With health care reform under way, the action shifts to the nation's capital as federal agencies refine the rules and regulations affecting a range of constituencies — such as payers, insurers, providers and patients. Wireless health could increasingly be part of the emerging health care delivery picture, which may benefit San Diego companies seeking customers for their technologies, Casey suggested.

He added that one of the many issues that will be challenging for businesses seeking future reimbursement is how the U.S. Food and Drug Administration will regulate wireless health. "There are privacy and liability issues, too, which makes it

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even more important to have a more educated policymaker base,” said Casey.

The event also gave San Diegans a chance to learn more about the \$100 million VA Innovation Initiative, a program also known as VAI2 that will invest in solutions to improve health care access, quality and performance, as well as lower the costs for treating veterans.

“It’s not just about wireless health,” Casey said, about the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs program, “but the VA is very interested in creating an environment to innovate the current delivery system, which is why it is running pilot projects around the country based around wireless health models.

“They’re facing a huge financial challenge with the aging of baby boomer veterans and the enormous strain it will present for their health care system,” said Casey.

\$10,000 Challenge

In an effort to help veterans, specifically those who live in remote areas, the institute has issued a \$10,000 challenge for manufacturers to create home-based-care initiatives.

The challenge calls on them to create an original mobile device technology that wirelessly connects patients with their veterans’ health care provider through sensors, processing units, gyroscopes, video teleconferencing, Bluetooth and other technologies.

“Hopefully, some San Diego companies will bid and we’ll see some action there,” said Casey.

Acknowledging the potential of doing business with entities such as the VA, Sotera Wireless CEO Tom Watlington said he went to D.C. to be a panelist, network, and scope out opportunities for his startup company, which is developing patient monitoring devices.

“The VA is a model for mobile health right now, with pilot projects assisting 30,000 veterans, so we’re very interested in how we might serve this population in the future,” said Watlington, whose company has 38 employees.

“The VA could be a very large customer,” he said, adding that Sotera has made a proposal for funding to adapt its technology, which includes a vital signs monitoring system, for use by the VA.

Bright Future

The devices are worn on the bodies of noncritical-care patients, said Watlington, adding that the monitors are being evaluated at local clinical trial sites such as Palomar Pomerado Health, Scripps Health and Sharp HealthCare hospitals. Sotera, which has yet to generate any revenue as it moves to FDA approval, has strong support for its product line. The company recently obtained \$10.8 million in backing

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in a Series C financing round led by a private equity firm, West Family Holdings LLC, run by Gary West, founder and chairman of the board of the West Wireless Health Institute. Other investors included Qualcomm Ventures and Intel Capital.

Watlington predicts a positive future for many wireless health companies and expects funders to support them because of the significant savings they could bring if they reduce the need for hospitalization of some people with chronic conditions.

“It’s important that industry, government and payers mix and tackle a lot of these common problems,” Watlington said about Health Care Innovation Day. “This event is significant in that it creates an opportunity to meet with people we rarely have access to.”

Casey already is looking forward to next year’s edition.

“Collaboration is key to creating a system to lower health care costs,” said Casey. “Obviously, we think wireless is a core technology to help get that done.”

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