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## Follow Bush's lead on electronic medical records

Mercury News Editorial

Take a guess at the percentage of U.S. patient data that exists only on paper: 25 percent? 50 percent? 75 percent?

Try 85 percent, which translates into an unacceptably high number of medical errors and is a major contributor to the 70 percent increase in health care costs since President Bush took office.

It's also an important issue for Silicon Valley -- politically and technologically. President Bush's effort to bring the medical profession into the 21st century needs help. Electronic health care records must become the norm rather than the exception.

The president's cost-effective strategy would not only cut health care costs by an estimated 25 to 30 percent. It also would reduce the number of patient deaths because of preventable medical mistakes, estimated at 100,000 every year.

The president signed an executive order last week that calls on the Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Veteran Affairs, Department of Defense and the Office of Personnel Management to use electronic medical records whenever possible. Bush also wants the four agencies to gather and share information about the costs of medical care procedures -- which can vary widely -- to cut costs to taxpayers.

An estimated 40 percent of U.S. health care costs are paid by federal, state and local governments. But the agencies don't have a mechanism for sharing information, which wastes time and creates endless redundancies.

Silicon Valley has already made a start in addressing the problem, pushing forward with Smart Health, the regional effort to make health records available electronically. But much more needs to be done.

Critics raise privacy concerns, and suitable safeguards must be implemented. But the needless deaths and the waste of billions of taxpayer dollars scream out for action. The medical world needs the same level of technology that safely provides Americans instant access to their banking records.