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Mitch Wagner

Tool Talk

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February 12, 2010 - 7:00 A.M.

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TAGS: dementia, home health care, SeniorBridge, Skype

IT TOPICS: Applications, Cloud Computing, Desktop Apps, Devices, Emerging Technology, Hardware, Internet, Laptops & Netbooks, Mobile

A company specializing in home care for the elderly plans on Sunday to launch a program to use Skype videoconferencing to connect dementia patients with their families.

People with dementia often have difficulty with phone conversations. But care managers and home health aides employed by the SeniorBridge company will get the patients set up on Skype, and use the service to connect with families, as well as allowing patients to videoconference with doctors and other healthcare providers.

SeniorBridge provides care management services nationally, for people who have complex conditions requiring care coordination at home.

Ten million adult children now care for their parents, and many do it long-distance. That's where the new videoconferencing service comes in, said SeniorBridge CEO Dr. Eric Rackow. "This benefits the adult child because they see their parents, and it benefits parents who want to see their children and relate to them," he said.

The first person to use the service will be in Florida, an 85-year-old who will use Skype to videoconference with an adult son living in Holland, Rackow said. The 85-year-old has difficulty using the phone, but will hopefully be able to successfully interact with her son using Skype video.

SeniorBridge has 30 offices in 10 states, primarily along the East Coast, in the New York metropolitan area and east and west coast of Florida, along with a national network of 500 care managers, professional nurses and social workers.

Rackow says his company drives down healthcare costs by allowing patients to remain in the home longer. On Medicare, 10% of patients account for two thirds of costs, and keeping patients out of hospitals and nursing homes reduces that spending. And any cost-cutting benefits help; as the American population ages, healthcare costs are soaring.

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The 85-and-older age group is the fastest growing in the U.S., and half have dementia.

The service uses the same, standard Skype available to consumers. SeniorBridge equips the home health aides with netbooks with built-in Webcams and 3G wireless networking cards from AT&T. The netbooks have Skype pre-installed and pre-configured, and the home health aides are trained by SeniorBridge's IT department in using the technology, said company CIO Howard Levine.

"It was very easy to set up," Levine said. SeniorBridge shipped out the netbooks preconfigured with a Skype account and wireless card, then scheduled conference calls to show the care workers how to use the tools. The range of skills in the care workers was broad, some had never even used laptops, others were already comfortable with Skype.

SeniorBridge chose Samsung NC20 netbooks for the program, because their 12" screen is larger than other netbooks, and it's a sturdy system with full-sized keyboard, built-in Webcam, and Windows XP, Levine said. The company currently has 10 netbooks deployed, and plans to send them to all 30 branches after the first call is completed Sunday.

The cost to SeniorBridge is about \$50 per month for the wireless service, plus \$500 for the netbook. SeniorBridge provides the Skype service at no additional cost, it's part of the home health care package.

What People Are Saying

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I have used Skype in a

Submitted by Anonymous on December 21, 2010 - 10:33 P.M.

I have used Skype in a nursing home setting and have learned it is difficult for some dementia patients to realize the person is not actually visiting in person.

It has to be emphasized that "this is a phone where you can see the other people," for one thing.

Another thing that helps is that the person calling the care home should pan the room they are in (if the person in the care center knows where that is) so it is clear the person on the computer screen is someplace else. If all the care center person can see is the face of the caller it can be very confusing for them to realize the person isn't there.

Things need to be reviewed over and over so the patient doesn't try to pick up or move the wireless devices.

And most certainly, a computer aide or person needs to be present at all times to negotiate the session between the two callers.

Anyone know of a blog or chat group that provides care and has more ideas about using SKYPE in nursing homes? I would like to know more helpful ideas. Thanks.

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iPad

Submitted by Bob on February 13, 2010 - 6:13 P.M.

Why not get them all an iPad?

Better interface and only \$15-30 per month!

Plus, isn't Skype free???

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I recently lost a loved one with dementia

Submitted by Anonymous on February 14, 2010 - 3:35 P.M.

First, I really wish something like this would have been available before she passed away. I live in another state and this setup would have allowed me to communicate on both a frequent and regular basis. This would have been priceless.

WRT an iPad, a laptop would be better since it allows for a larger variety of deployments. Placed on a table in a dining or recreation area, on a tray table next to or over a bed, etc., depending on the mobility and cognizance of the patient. A patient may not always be capable of holding the device in their hand(s).

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The iPad is not available

Submitted by Anonymous on February 14, 2010 - 1:26 P.M.

The iPad is not available yet. Also, the iPad does not have a built-in camera. A case and camera connection kit add to the cost which would be approximately \$300 higher than a Netbook.

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This is a great story! There

Submitted by Melinda Villagran on February 13, 2010 - 7:57 P.M.

This is a great story! There are a lot of people who become more and more disconnected because they are home bound. Thanks Mitch!

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