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## Healthcare Enterprise: change:healthcare

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Christopher Parks (left) and Robert Hendricks, co-founders of change:healthcare.

With consumers making more of their own healthcare decisions and footing more of the bill, information transparency is critical. That simple premise was the catalyst for change:healthcare, a Williamson County company founded "to help consumers follow their healthcare dollar," said Robert Hendrick, one of change:healthcare's co-founders.

It all started in 2006 after the company's other founder, Christopher Parks, lost both his parents to cancer in a year's time. Despite 15 years in the healthcare industry, he was overwhelmed and astounded at the challenge of sorting through medical bills and payers' explanation of benefits (EOB). The idea germinated for a software product, which he dubbed MedBillManager, to help consumers track, manage and organize their medical bills.

Hendrick, with more than a decade of experience in information technology and technology product development, could feel Parks' pain. Today, Hendrick and his wife are the proud parents of healthy eight-year-old twin girls – but those girls were born a full two months premature. "I immediately connected with what he was going through and the cause that he had taken up," Hendrick recalled. The two partnered up and soon realized that, while invoice and EOB management was critical, it wasn't the only piece to the puzzle.

Today, change:healthcare offers consumers access to a medical bill-management platform as well as other information to help them make educated choices about providers, payers, prescription drugs and more. Earlier this year, the company began the transition from a subscription-based service to a service employers may buy and offer their employees. There are still free services on the site, too.

"Employers are wanting to reconnect with their employees. If they don't get employees engaged with what their healthcare costs are, they really don't have any chance of controlling the costs at all," Hendrick explained. Thus, change:healthcare is reaching out to human-resources departments, benefits consultants and third-party administrators, selling them on the attributes offered by change:healthcare and the ability of empowered, knowledgeable consumers to save money.

"When consumers control the market, they realize higher quality, they realize better value, they realize lower pricing," Hendrick said.

In addition to tracking their personal healthcare costs, change:healthcare also offers consumers Medstimate, a service the company recently re-tooled and touts as "yanking the covers off the medical world and exposing fair prices for consumer-driven healthcare in the process." Cost data (which in no way identify individual patients) are culled from the payers of those companies that contract with change:healthcare, as well as from providers, the government and consumers. The information is presented as ranges of actual prices charged for office visits, outpatient procedures, inpatient stays and other healthcare encounters market by market. Additionally, the system allows consumers to enter their own data – and their opinions of providers.

"You don't sit around the dinner table and talk about how much you paid to go have that bunion removed. But you do sit around and ask what you paid for your oil change," said Hendrick, noting that Medstimate allows consumers to check the going rate for that bunion removal.

Should providers feel threatened by this open access to information? "The physicians are the ones who stand to gain just as much as anybody else," Hendrick said. "We initially worried that providers would think that we were a threat, worried about their pricing being exposed. But the truth of the matter is that Dr. Jones and Dr. Smith can't really tell each other what their pricing is. They have no way of knowing whether they've negotiated a good rate or not. They really don't know what services are overburdened in a market. They need transparency in the marketplace so they can perform better. What do people think of me? What is my reputation? Am I overcharging? Am I undercharging?"

Change:healthcare is also tackling a problem that's been a bugaboo for physicians since the Internet became an overarching source of healthcare information. That problem is information inconsistency. In fact, change:healthcare and a similar technology company in Ohio joined forces to study just how big the problem is. They discovered that selected basic information about several physicians in the two states was wrong as many times as it was right. Thus change:healthcare is one of 12 members of a healthcare-technology consortium that earlier this year helped introduce the dCard – short for Doctor Card. The dCard is a standard format for capturing, maintaining and sharing data about physicians, thus making it easier for consumers to check up on a doctor and for physicians to follow what's being said about them and correct any mistakes.

"For one thing, the dCard makes sure that when we're sharing anonymous information about a physician that we're all talking about the same doctor," Hendrick said.

The new dCard format contains four sections: personal, professional, educational and training. Personal information includes the

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name, specialty, certification, license number and so forth. The professional section includes office information such as hours and insurance accepted. Education information includes the schools and countries where the physician studied. Finally, the training section lists residency and fellowship information and societies.

As for change:healthcare's future, Hendrick said, "We have a good core set of features built up in the system and a lot more planned." He noted that most American companies change health insurance carriers every two to three years. "So, is your insurance company really geared toward your long-term wellbeing, or is it trying to get you through the next two to three years? That's what it comes down to," he said. "Transparency is required, because all the other parties involved don't necessarily have your best interest in mind."

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