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Overseas patients to get 2d opinions via Internet

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The telemedicine movement took a giant leap forward yesterday when a Cambridge company and several Boston hospitals agreed to provide second opinions for one of the world's largest insurers by reviewing patient records on the Internet.

WorldCare Inc. of Cambridge signed the contract with American Life Insurance Co., which will allow American Life's customers, for a fee, to seek electronic second opinions from specialists at Massachusetts General Hospital, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, and three other US hospitals.

It's illegal in this country for doctors to provide medical advice to out-of-state patients over the Internet. But the telemedicine director for the Boston hospitals said his doctors will not communicate directly with the patients, all of whom live overseas. Instead, they will consult with their regular doctors.

"It's a question of doing it in a way that promotes the highest quality of care and ethics," said Dr. Joseph Kvedar, director of telemedicine for Partners HealthCare, the parent company of Massachusetts General and Brigham and Women's.

Critics of online care argue that it's inappropriate for doctors to advise and conduct ongoing relationships with patients they've never met. And they say that's particularly true when the doctor is not licensed in the patient's home state, and therefore not subject to state standards and oversight.

Kvedar said that doctors charge WorldCare a fee, which he would not disclose, for the consultations. But, he said, the program "is not a revenue center for us." WorldCare, founded in 1992, has helped arrange second opinions to more than 10,000 patients and physicians.

The Partners hospitals have provided about 600 second opinions a year to patients in 30 countries for WorldCare and other online organizations for several years. The agreement with American Life is expected to significantly expand the program.

It also will make the practice less expensive for the insured, who now pay about \$1,000 for a second opinion from a US hospital. American Life will charge patients \$5 per year for second-opinion coverage.

Of the 600 second opinions that Partners provides annually to over-

seas patients, about 60 patients end up coming to one of the Boston hospitals for treatment - which may be the real financial benefit.

"Our goal is to raise the standard of care around the world," Kvedar said. But, he added, "it does get our name out."

American Life Insurance will provide the second opinions to patients in 16 countries in Latin American, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. Using secure digital technology and a private telecommunications network, WorldCare will transmit medical records to the hospitals. Also participating are the Cleveland Clinic Foundation, Duke University Health System, and Johns Hopkins Medicine.