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San Francisco General Hospital and Trauma Center technology innovation
improves quality and lowers costs
eReferral a model for health reform
Strengthens primary care and speeds access to specialists

SAN FRANCISCO -- Here's the problem. Specialty care is hard to access. Getting in to see a cardiologist, dermatologist or gastroenterologist can be difficult. Long waits can endanger patients' health. On the other hand, not all patients who are referred to specialists really need to see them. Those unnecessary visits clog the queue, waste time and money, and create delays for patients in need.

Now add health reform. Starting next year, more people will be insured, seeking care, and some of them will need to see specialists. Can the system support them? A homegrown solution at San Francisco General Hospital and Trauma Center (SFGH) is delivering terrific results. Waits in most SFGH specialty clinics have fallen by about 50 percent.

SFGH, the city's safety net hospital, provides specialty care for patients in five hospital-based, 11 Department of Public Health community-based, and 10 independent nonprofit community clinics. With 500,000 outpatient visits per year, SFGH has had to figure out a solution to the problem of specialty care access.

Enter eReferral, a web-based system that creates a forum for back-and-forth consultation between the referring doctors and specialists. The primary care doctor submits a referral to the specialist electronically, which is automatically appended with the patient's information from the electronic medical record. The specialist is able make an initial judgment about whether the referral should be scheduled, if there are additional tests to run, or if a conversation would help to determine what's best for the patient. Through this process, unneeded appointments are warded off, and urgent ones are identified quickly.

In this way, eReferral increases access to specialty expertise, whether or not a visit is the right result. A new article by Dr. Alice Chen, SFGH Chief Integration Officer, in the New England Journal of Medicine, "*eReferral – A New Model for Integrated Care*" (<http://www.nejm.org/>) outlines SFGH's experience with this ingenious approach.

In the first nine medical clinics to adopt eReferral, the average wait time dropped from a range of 112 to 74 days to 49 to 27 days within one year. Waits in most SFGH specialty clinics fell about

50 percent. Today, about 20 percent of referrals do not result in specialty appointments, with patient care continuing by the primary care doctor after consultation with the specialist.

SFGH primary care doctors now rely on eReferral to improve quality of care for their patients, and expand their own skills. By accessing specialists, they learn more about patients' conditions and can handle a broader scope with just a little help. This arrangement strengthens primary care, which will be the foundation of health reform. It also lowers the cost of care, as specialist care is more expensive than primary care.

San Francisco General Hospital and Trauma Center (SFGH)

San Francisco General Hospital and Trauma Center is the sole provider of trauma and psychiatric emergency services for the City and County of San Francisco. A comprehensive medical center, SFGH serves some 100,000 patients per year and provides 20 percent of the city's inpatient care. In 2011, SFGH became the first hospital in the country to be certified for a Traumatic Brain Injury program. As San Francisco's public hospital, SFGH's mission is to provide quality health care and trauma services with compassion and respect to patients that include the city's most vulnerable. General Hospital is also one of the nation's top academic medical centers, partnering with the University of California, San Francisco School of Medicine on clinical training and research.