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Tag up for health

Personal flash drive stores medical data

By Carol Benfell New York Times Regional News GROUP

SONOMA, Calif.— Kiera Larbre is pregnant and wants to be sure she's doing everything she can to protect her health and the health of her unborn baby.

So she bought a computerized ID tag that allows her to carry her complete medical history in a locket-sized piece of plastic on a chain around her neck.

A company in Sonoma is seeking a patent on the device, called SOS DataTag, which plugs into any computer, requires no special software and gives instant access to medical records and images.

"If I'm not conscious or I can't speak, it gives the medical professional my information," said Larbre, 29, of Sonoma. "I used to work in a hospital and I know how it works. You come in and they can't find your history. They need to know what medications I'm on."

Larbre and her husband, Joseph, also bought DataTags for her in-laws.

"They travel a lot, to places like Africa. It gives us peace of mind to know they have their health records with them," Larbre said.

The DataTag is a flat, 1-inch-by-2-inch plastic sleeve that holds a removable flash drive — a thumb-sized data storage device.

It's made by Sonoma Promotional Products, a 10-year-old company that makes promotional items for businesses and nonprofits.

The DataTag is an outgrowth of the medical alert bracelets and tags that have been around for more than a decade, and is aimed at people who travel or have chronic conditions, or just want to be certain each physician they visit knows their exact health history.

It's the newest arrival in the burgeoning world of electronic medical records, where doctors and hospitals search through computers, not file folders, for a patient's health information, said Kelly Grant, Sonoma Promotional's vice president of business development.

About 2,600 DataTags have been sold since the product was launched six months ago, and many medical providers have not yet heard of them. An outreach campaign is planned, Grant said.

Gary Greensweig, chief medical officer at Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital, said he will be watching to see if the devices catch on.

"While I'm not specifically familiar with this product, I have seen similar products and I do believe they are very useful to patients and to providers," Greensweig said.

"We can definitely see ourselves using and integrating a product like this in the near future, if this is the direction consumers would like to see patient information shared with their physicians, hospitals and other providers," Greensweig said.

Sonoma Promotional has 27 employees and operates out of what was once an auto parts store.

With annual revenues of more than \$6 million, the company makes lapel pins, key chains and other promotional products as well as the colored silicon bracelets used for charity fundraising.

The DataTag and low-tech medical alert bracelets and tags are marketed through the company's SOS Alert Products division.

Sonoma Promotional employees, who frequently travel to trade shows across the country, pointed out that conventional bracelets and tags carry only a small amount of information. They urged company founder Bernie Friedman, an engineer, and his electronics guru, Michael Chidlow, to find a better way.

As the two men gathered information, they realized how critical health information could be, Grant said.

"The eighth-largest killer in the U.S. is 'medical mistakes.' The fourth-largest killer is 'adverse reaction to medical prescription,'" Grant said. "We wanted to create something that would not only protect our staff while traveling but help others maintain their medical records," she said.

Several U.S. companies sell a medical alert service. They keep a patient's medical history in their computer files and give the patient a necklace or bracelet that tells medical personnel where to call.

But those services involve monthly or annual charges, and the doctor must place a call. The DataTag has a one-time \$55 fee, and the information — including images such as X-rays or MRIs — is available immediately, Grant said.

Although the product is new and medical personnel may not be familiar with it, doctors and paramedics will readily identify the DataTag because of the universal medical symbol on the cover, Grant said.

Larbre said it took her about 20 minutes to list her health information on a series of forms.

"It's just a matter of getting all your information together," she said. New information can be added at any time.

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