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Tech alliance aims for seamless patient "telecare"

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By Ben Hirschler

LONDON (Reuters) - A broad alliance of technology and health companies plans to ride a coming wave of home-based healthcare by hammering out guidelines to make mobile patient-monitoring devices work together seamlessly.

The 22-member Continua Health Alliance, a nonprofit group, was launched on Wednesday in Europe, a region seen as ripe for "telecare" following high-profile attempts by Britain and other governments to promote cost-effective health IT systems.

Members of the alliance include Intel Corp <INTC.O>, International Business Machines Corp <IBM.N>, Cisco Systems Inc <CSCO.O>, GE Healthcare <GE.N>, Motorola Inc <MOT.N>, Philips Electronics NV <PHG.AS> and Roche Holding AG <ROG.VX>.

Over the next 18 months, Continua plans to select connectivity standards and set out interoperability guidelines to overcome current problems of hardware and software incompatibility.

Products that comply with the new guidelines will carry a Continua logo to let consumers, doctors and hospitals know which systems work together.

Continua's President David Whitlinger said the alliance did not intend to re-invent the wheel and would endorse existing connectivity solutions, such as Bluetooth or Wi-Fi or Ethernet links, as appropriate.

"We are about developing guidelines for interoperability, and we will use standards off the shelf from the ecosystem that exists today," he told reporters at a media briefing.

Continua also plans to lobby regulatory authorities to ensure consistent policies are developed for using hi-tech devices and will campaign to get equipment reimbursed by governments and insurers.

Given the world's aging population and the prevalence of chronic conditions such as heart disease, Whitlinger said it was inevitable that healthcare would increasingly migrate from hospitals to the home.

It is a trend that is likely to be welcomed by patients and payers alike, provided doctors can keep in remote contact with their patients to monitor their health.

Continua's backers envision a future in which patients' blood pressure, weight, blood glucose levels, medications and general fitness will be monitored from a distance by an array of inter-connected mobile devices.

The hybrid world of healthcare IT is already worth more than \$50 billion a year, according to some industry analysts' estimates, and is growing strongly.

Sharad Gandhi, Intel's European director for digital health, said IT traditionally accounted for just 1-2 percent of total healthcare spending in Europe, but this was likely to rise to at least 5 percent by 2010.

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