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AG Mednet Launches Digital Network To Create Teleradiology Marketplace

AG MEDNET LAUNCHES DIGITAL NETWORK TO CREATE TELERADIOLOGY MARKETPLACE

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Just don't call them the Napster of radiology. A Boston-based start-up firm this week is launching a telecommunications network across the U.S. designed to make it easier than ever for radiologists to distribute and share cases with others, with the goal of jump-starting a new era of teleradiology-based imaging services.

At first glance, AG Mednet's network might resemble that of Napster's infamous peer-to-peer file-sharing system, which was shut down under pressure from record companies due to copyright concerns. But a more accurate comparison would be to a national telephone company, which provides the infrastructure and connections that enable millions of people to communicate with each other, according to Abraham Gutman, president and CEO of the firm.

The company's ultimate goal is to become the central enabler behind the development of a teleradiology marketplace that links those who read the images with those who need reading services, without requiring users to be tied to a single business partner or use the same teleradiology software.

"Once you are on the network, you can connect to multiple folks on the network," Gutman said. "Everyone can contact everyone else."

Gutman developed the idea behind AG Mednet after talking with hospital administrators about the ongoing shortage of radiologists relative to rising imaging procedure volume, and the difficulties involved in digital image transfer and distribution. Many felt that the existing system, which relied on technologies such as virtual private networks (VPNs), is too cumbersome to set up and use.

Gutman decided to develop a solution that would fit within a hospital's existing workflow, and would be as easy to use as a facility's own network.

To that end, AG Mednet has built both a telecommunications network based on fast 10-Gbps Ethernet connections, as well as a protocol for encrypting DICOM images and routing them through the network, Gutman said. AG Mednet has negotiated "transit agreements" with major U.S. telecommunications providers to ensure that its data is transferred quickly by taking the shortest path from origin to destination.

Whenever it signs up a new customer, AG Mednet installs what it calls "nodes" with the customer's imaging department or center. The nodes communicate with the facility's modalities or reading workstations, and also serve as a bridge to AG Mednet's 10-Gbps network, transferring encrypted images losslessly onto the network. The customer continues to use its own PACS or teleradiology software, Gutman said. AG Mednet gets paid by charging customers a fee to subscribe to the network, and then a small amount per transaction.

AG Mednet's services have multiple applications, Gutman said. The most obvious use would be to connect AG Mednet subscribers who need images read with radiologists who have time to take on extra work. In addition, the company believes it will make it easier for radiology groups to start offering teleradiology services by relieving them of much of the IT investment required to get going.

The company has also found a promising market for its services in the realm of clinical trials. Using AG Mednet's network is much more efficient than the previous method of distributing images, which relied on CDs and DVDs sent via FedEx, Gutman said.

One of the company's earliest customers is Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, which provides remote study

interpretations to more than 15 regional hospitals and imaging centers in Massachusetts. Brigham and Women's is using AG Mednet as an alternative to traditional PACS and VPN solutions as part of the hospital's Nightwatch and Community Radiology teleradiology programs.

Although AG Mednet is making its major public splash this week, the company was founded in 2005, and has been signing up clients by word of mouth -- the firm at present has 70 of its nodes installed at customer sites. The company has also been working with locum tenens providers, who are finding that using AG Mednet's network enables them to use a single radiologist to provide services to multiple hospitals at the same time.

Ultimately, Gutman believes AG Mednet will empower radiologists by giving them more flexibility in the amount and type of additional work they can take on.

"For radiologists who want to build their practices, they have a whole bunch of cases that are available to them," Gutman said. "They can market themselves and their services. If they only want to read neurospine (images), they can get neurospines from multiple sources."

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