

# FDA to require bar coding of hospital medications

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**WASHINGTON** — Almost all medications given in the hospital soon must bear a supermarket-style bar code that health workers will match to patients to help ensure they get the right dose of the right drug at the right time.

The code, just an eighth of an inch tall on individual pill packs, is a major new requirement for manufacturers. The Food and Drug Administration says the requirement could cut in half the drug errors now thought to kill about 7,000 hospitalized patients a year.

"Medication errors are a serious health problem, but they're a preventable problem," said Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson in announcing the regulation yesterday.

Added FDA Commissioner Mark McClellan, "This is a proven approach to reducing errors." He said the change could prevent half a million adverse events, new or worsening symptoms resulting from the treatment that patients received, in the next 20 years and save \$5 billion a year.

Hospitals, patient advocates and drug manufacturers eagerly have awaited the rule. In fact, the FDA heeded pleas to speed up enforcement. All new medications will have to bear bar codes within 60 days of FDA approval; medicines already on the market must bear them within two years, a year earlier than first planned.

Drug errors can happen when busy health workers misread a patient's chart and administer the wrong drug or wrong dose, or give a drug to the wrong patient, or give a drug too often.

When patients are admitted to a hospital that uses a bar code system, they are given a wristband with their own identifying code. After the wristband and the

intended medicine are scanned, if the drug does not match the patient's medical chart, a computer beeps an alarm.

Errors plummeted when veterans hospitals adopted bar codes several years ago, relabeling all their in-house drugs for electronic identification.

But as of December, only about 125 of the nation's 5,000-plus hospitals were using bar code systems, according to Bridge Medical Inc., a

leading manufacturer of bar code readers. That is partly because only about 35% of their pharmaceutical supplies came with the codes affixed.

The government's new rule means more hospitals probably will start using the safety system because virtually all the prescription drugs and most over-the-counter medicines that they administer, including blood products and vaccines, will arrive

already with a bar code.

Hospitals will not be required to use the codes. But the regulation does set standards to ensure that even the cheapest, most basic scanner will recognize any medicine.

According to Bridge, the bar code maker, a hospital's cost for bar code scanning technology can range from \$200,000 to more than \$1 million, depending on its size and how complex a system it desires. ■