IBM Offers Watson's Medical Expertise

Jim Fitzgerald, AP

Dr. Watson is accepting new patients. The Watson supercomputer is graduating from its medical residency and is being offered commercially to doctors and health insurance companies, IBM said.

IBM Corp., the health insurer WellPoint, Inc. and Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center announced two Watson-based applications — one to help assess treatments for lung cancer and one to help manage health insurance decisions and claims.

Both applications take advantage of the speed, huge database and language skill the computer demonstrated in defeating the best human *Jeopardy!* players on television two years ago. IBM said Watson has improved its performance by 240 percent since the *Jeopardy!* win. In both applications, doctors or insurance company workers will access Watson through a tablet or computer to quickly compare a patient's medical records to what it has learned, and make recommendations in decreasing order of confidence.

In the cancer program, the computer will be considering what treatment is most likely to succeed. In the insurance program, it will consider what treatment should be authorized for payment. Watson — actually named for IBM founder Thomas Watson and not Sherlock Holmes' friend — has been trained in medicine through pilot programs at Indianapolis-based WellPoint and at Sloan-Kettering in New York. Manoj Saxena, an IBM general manager, said the supercomputer has ingested 1,500 lung cancer cases from Sloan-Kettering records, plus two million pages of text from journals, textbooks and treatment guidelines. It also learned "like a medical student," by being corrected when it was questioned by doctors and came up with wrong answers, Saxena said in an interview.

"Watson is not making the decisions on treatment or authorization," Saxena said. "It is essentially reducing the effort for doctors and nurses by going through thousands of pages of information for each case." The lung cancer program is being adopted by two medical groups, the Maine Center for Cancer Medicine and WestMed in New York's Westchester County. Saxena said it should be running at both groups by next month.

WellPoint itself is already using the insurance application in Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio and Wisconsin. It will be selling both applications — at prices still to be negotiated — and will compensate IBM under a contract between the two companies, an IBM spokeswoman said. WellPoint said using Watson should not increase insurance premiums because of savings from waste and errors.

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