

The blood's in the mail

BioIQ takes Netflix approach to health screening

BY STEPHEN NELLIS

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Santa Barbara-based BioIQ has signed a deal with UnitedHealthcare to provide the South Coast firm's at-home health screening kits to as many as 11 million UHC customers.

BioIQ's packets require a pin prick and a few drops of blood to test for conditions such as diabetes, cancer, heart disease and kidney disease. But what drives BioIQ is a Netflix-like approach to delivering the tests, an easy-to-use Web interface and some heavy-duty backend engineering to make the resulting data compatible with the burgeoning electronic medical records movement.

"We're trying to re-engineer health care," said Justin Bellante, BioIQ's CEO.

BioIQ, which raised \$2.5 million in venture capital in 2008, struck a deal earlier this month with UHC to offer BioIQ's kits as part of corporate wellness programs for employers with self-funded health plans. UHC makes the kits available to employers, and BioIQ gets paid based on how many participants sign up. That could be as many as 11 million of UHC's 25 million enrollees.

Here's how the BioIQ system works: A customer signs up on BioIQ's website, or, for UHC customers, through an existing UHC online account. The customer chooses a testing kit to be mailed to the home — the UHC deal covers screening for diabetes and heart disease — and pricks a finger to draw a few drops of blood. The sample gets mailed back to a lab, and the results show up in BioIQ's online vault. The customer can share the data with a corporate wellness coach at work or a doctor of his or her choice, or keep it private.



Justin Bellante, the CEO of Santa Barbara-based BioIQ, with some of the company's mail-in medical screening kits.

The customer gets information on what to do about the data — a suggestion to talk a doctor about diabetes if glucose levels are severely off normal, for example. The employers that participate get anonymous, aggregated data about their employee population's risk profile.

The idea is that better data helps employees, companies and insurers spot illnesses sooner and prevent them, bringing down health care costs for all.

"When you're measuring health, it's one thing to do a survey and another thing to get biometric data," Bellante said. "That's the clinical gold standard."

Corporate wellness programs have expanded rapidly in recent years, driven by economics. For each dollar that a business puts into wellness, it saves \$3 in health care costs down the road, according to estimates by the Wellness Council of America.

But to make measurements like that, businesses need a baseline. That's where screening comes in, Bellante said.

"Screening is a critical part of wellness," he said. "You can't just throw solutions at a problem you

don't understand."

What doctors and insurers like about the BioIQ system is that it has the potential to screen more patients. The now-standard approach — big "screening day" sessions on corporate sites and hospitals — is expensive and catches less than a third of coverage populations. And with telecommuters and consultants on the rise during the recession, fewer and fewer employees work at big corporate campuses.

"What attracted us was the fact that we could bring very, very important screening testing out of offices and hospitals" and into patients' homes, said Roger Muller, a medical director with UHC who oversaw a pilot program with BioIQ's kits in Washington. "We saw that this testing modality helped us identify 10 percent of employees previously undiagnosed for high cholesterol and 4 percent previously undiagnosed for diabetes. Employers value this in terms of downstream medical cost savings they would otherwise incur if they allowed otherwise undiagnosed conditions to progress."

The federal government has created incentives and punishments to spur the adoption of health care technology. The well-publicized \$44,000 carrot available to all doctors' offices is balanced by a stick — Medicare reimbursements will

fall for doctors that don't adopt.

"The kind of technology platform that BioIQ has allows it to plug and play with all these systems," said Rita Moya, an adviser to BioIQ who was once head of the National Health Foundation before working for the technology arm of UHC's parent. "Anybody using BioIQ can send their lab results to any number of these providers. That's really important, to not be wedded to one of these products or one of these systems."

Another way BioIQ aims to set itself apart is the customer experience, Bellante said. Instead of waiting rooms and endless paper forms, BioIQ goes for an easy-to-use website. Bellante said the goal is to marry information technology and low-hassle testing to spur people to put the test results to use by consulting a doctor or making lifestyle changes.

"This data has to work for the individual," Bellante said. "Now that the consumer is going to have control and access to all their health information, it really is going to be consumer-driven. We're evolving to a place where individuals are going to decide what their health care is going to be."

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BioIQ CEO