ORLANDO: Google has unveiled a new plan for patients who want to gain control of their medical records. At the 2008 Annual Conference of the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society in Florida, USA, Chief Executive Eric Schmidt said that his company has signed deals with leading US hospitals and medical companies, such as Aetna Inc and Walmart Stores Inc pharmacies, to help them securely share sensitive health data.

Schmidt said it would likely be a few months before Google Health is offered widely. The password-protected web service will store health records on Google computers, with a medical services directory that lets users import doctors’ records, drug history and test results. Google aims to foster sharing of information between these services, but keep control in patients’ hands, allowing them to schedule appointments or refill prescriptions. Schmidt said that his company has no plan to sell ads on the new service and aims to make money indirectly when users search for other medical information.

Earlier this year, Google announced it will team up with a leading academic medical research clinic, Cleveland Clinic, to test a data exchange that puts patients in charge of records. Many other companies—such as IBM, Oracle Corp and Siemens—have already worked on such digitization and Google’s biggest rival, Microsoft, has recently introduced HealthVault, a hub to collect, store and share personal medical information on the internet.

While medical providers are covered by US privacy laws, there is little in the way of established privacy, security and data usage standards for electronic personal health records. Google said it is prepared to resist fishing expeditions by lawyers seeking to subpoena personal medical records stored on Google Health. Last year, it went to court to defeat an effort by the US Justice Department to request some Google search records. “We’ve taken a pretty aggressive position in a pro-consumer way in the US, but I do want to assure you we are subject to US law,” Schmidt said.
LEIPZIG: Dentists in affluent, high-priced markets, such as North America, Japan, Australia, and Western Europe may need to keep an eye on overseas and cross-border competition in the form of dental tourism.

A dental tourism survey by RevaHealth.com, a medical and dental tourism search engine in Dublin, Ireland, claims "high levels of satisfaction" among dental tourists it polled. "Patients who travelled abroad to receive treatment revealed an average satisfaction rating of 84 per cent, along with an average cost saving of US$6,400, or 60 per cent of the cost of their treatment locally," the company says in a release.

More than 95 per cent of respondents to RevaHealth.com's survey cited cost as the main reason they opted to receive dental treatment abroad. However, they listed quality as the deciding factor in determining which clinic they went to.

"Patients reported wide variations in the amount of the money they saved and the abilities of certain clinics to communicate effectively," RevaHealth.com says. "There were also variations in satisfaction between countries as a whole, with patient satisfaction highest overall for clinics in Hungary, Poland and Thailand."

Thailand has recently become one of the most popular destinations for medical tourists in Asia, earning the country more US$1 billion a year. The Thai government has invested in many areas of the country's burgeoning medical tourism market, from speeding visa clearance for patients to guaranteeing the highest standards through accreditation programmes. According to RevaHealth, 90 per cent of Australian dental patients that go abroad are visiting the country for treatment.