

OPENING STATEMENT

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Ranking Member

Subcommittee on Environment, Technology & Standards

Health Care IT:

*What are the Opportunities for and
Barriers to Interoperable Health IT Systems*

February 23, 2006

I want to welcome everyone to this afternoon's hearing. I would like to begin by thanking Representative Reichert for traveling down from Seattle to take part in this hearing. I also want to thank Dr. Jeffrey, the Director of the National Institute of Standards and Technology, for traveling from Washington to take part in this hearing as well.

Health care costs and efficiency has become the issue of the moment. The most recent report by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services predicts that health care costs could consume close to 20% of GDP within ten years. There is general agreement that increased utilization of information technology (IT) in the health care industry can save billions of dollars in costs and save thousands of lives each year.

This hearing is a follow-up to a roundtable discussion that I headed back in August. Before that roundtable, the solution seemed obvious - get all patient information out of paper files and onto electronic databases that can connect to one another. This way our doctors can access all the information that they need to help any given patient at any time, in any place. In other words we would create an interoperable system of doctors, hospitals, laboratories, pharmacies and insurers. If I can use any ATM at almost any place in the world and international financial markets operate seamlessly, why must I fill out a patient information form every time I'm referred to a medical specialist? That initial roundtable made me aware of not only the technical barriers, but also the "system" barriers to the widespread adoption of IT in the health care industry.

Today's hearing will focus on the technical barriers to developing a comprehensive health care IT system. Technical standards are critical - not only to issues of interoperability of systems, but also to the privacy and security of electronic health records. I hope our witnesses will identify some of the potential stumbling blocks to the development of the required standards and make recommendations on how we can best move forward.

We need technical standards to create a functional IT network. However, in order to reap the benefits of a comprehensive health care IT network it must be fully utilized in all health care settings. There is agreement that IT use lags in the health care industry, with only 10% of hospitals and 5% of all physicians using IT effectively. We need to understand these non-technical barriers to the adoption of IT by our health care industry. I hope our witnesses will address factors such as capital costs, training and education of medical personnel, reimbursement structure and patient confidence in their testimony. If we want to be successful in our efforts we need to address these issues early on in the process.

Many of you may be wondering about the Science Committee's involvement in health care IT issues. The Science Committee in the mid-nineties held hearings on the technical aspects surrounding the security and privacy issues of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). As a result of those hearings the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) assisted the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in the development of some of its regulations. I was pleased that HHS turned to NIST early on in the development of the President's Health Information Technology Plan. NIST has a long history of working with the private-sector in the development of standards for the IT industry.

In the Pacific Northwest, we have a group of experts who have been working on these health care IT issues and just a few of them are represented by the panelists before us today. I intend to profit from their experience and knowledge as Federal efforts move forward. I want to thank all of the witnesses for taking time from their busy schedules to appear before us today. We value your expertise and are looking to you for guidance.