



‘Telehealth’ Promise: Better Care, Lower Cost

By Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.)

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There is no question that rising healthcare costs present some very serious challenges to Congress. However, while opinions diverge over large, comprehensive changes for improving our healthcare system, I believe there are incremental steps we can take right now to improve patient care. As a strong advocate of proven health technologies, such as telehealth, I know there are bipartisan initiatives that can help reduce healthcare costs and improve access to care.

Medical technology is always advancing and improving. We are able to transfer medical records, tests and images electronically. Advances specifically in telehealth have allowed doctors and patients to have real-time contact by video. Clinics in small towns and rural areas in many states are tied through telehealth to major hospitals. With greater access to doctors and specialists, patients are able to get the care they need, stay healthier, and save on healthcare costs.

In states like South Dakota, the benefits of telehealth are easy to see. Telehealth technologies use the Internet and phone lines to connect doctors to patients who live great distances from specialists, or in areas without many physicians or specialists. In remote areas, patients can access their doctors without having to travel large distances, miss work, find daycare for children, or spend money on travel to and from appointments. Amazingly, telehealth and video monitoring can be used in areas such as dentistry, infectious disease, pediatric care, or home monitoring to help individuals with chronic diseases manage their own care.

While access to telehealth continues to grow, there are still significant barriers to implementing telehealth technology, particularly for small, rural providers who do not have the necessary resources to purchase equipment or gain expertise. That is why I have introduced the Fostering Independence Through Technology Act, or FITT Act (S. 321), which would allow Medicare to conduct a budget-neutral pilot program to provide incentive payments to home health providers who use home-monitoring equipment. The FITT Act has bipartisan support, with the cosponsorship of Sens. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) and Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) and the support of the National Association for Home Care and Hospice, Health Care Technology Association of America, and individual providers and groups nationwide.

Under this demonstration project, home health agencies would receive extra payments to use home-monitoring equipment as a cost-saving technique. In turn, the money saved

would go back into the Medicare program. By providing incentives to expand the use of telehealth and home monitoring we can save money for the Medicare program and improve care for seniors.

Providing better healthcare at a lower cost is a mission that everyone in Congress and the healthcare field can embrace. I am excited to see technologies develop that have the potential to provide rural and urban residents with greater access to high-quality care.

As we continue to work together to find solutions to high healthcare costs, I know that cost-saving technologies like telehealth will play a significant role in America's health care strategy. I urge members of Congress to learn more about the potential of telehealth to improve healthcare in America, and to make telehealth technologies a long-term part of our plan to modernize the healthcare system.

Thune is a member of the Senate Small Business and Entrepreneurship Committee.