

# Meade County Times-Tribune

## **Improving Access To Information Can Improve Health Care**

By Sen. John Thune  
June 17, 2008

Families across South Dakota and the nation are well aware of the cost of health care today, and it is rightly an issue that should concern leaders in Congress and other levels of government. While partisan politics often overshadows some of the common-sense steps we can take to improve access to affordable, high-quality care, expanding access to effective health care technologies has been one area of agreement.

Moving to electronic medical records, for example, can significantly reduce medical errors and save costs for patients and doctors. Improving access to telehealth in rural states like South Dakota can also help lower costs and bring specialized care to underserved areas. There are improved technologies being developed today which will further advance medicine in the 21st Century.

Recently, a large group of stakeholders in South Dakota came together to apply for a federal grant to expand access to electronic medical records for small and medium-sized primary care physician offices. The "South Dakota eHealth Collaborative" is comprised of hospitals, clinics, physicians, insurers and other health organizations across the state and has taken the lead in creating a network to electronically share medical information and improve patient care across South Dakota. The South Dakota eHealth Collaborative is seeking to partner with federal authorities to help implement this project, and I look forward to working to facilitate assistance at the federal level.

Another technology that continues to have a significant impact in improving quality of care in South Dakota is telehealth. I was pleased to attend the 2008 Great Plains Telehealth Resource and Assistance Center conference in Sioux Falls on June 2, where telehealth providers came together from around the region to educate one another and find ways to improve access to new technologies.

Using telehealth, a patient in a rural area can visit with a specialist many miles away without having to travel hours for a consultation. In rural areas like South Dakota, the use of this technology can improve a patient's access to specialized care like never before. I am pleased with the progress we have made at the federal level to lower some of the barriers to telehealth access, and I will continue to advocate in the Senate for increased telehealth support.

June 8-14 is "National Health IT Week," an annual designation given by public and private sector organizations across the country that unite to promote the adoption of effective health information technologies. I am excited about the advances being made in

connecting doctors to patients and reducing medical errors to ensure the best possible quality of care.

Congress can take several common-sense steps to improve the quality of health care while reducing the cost to patients by embracing the use of effective information technology. Recent history has witnessed remarkable breakthroughs in the health care field, and there are many more to come. I am excited to see South Dakota health care providers at the leading edge of improving access to health information and services through technology.