

# The Washington Times

## Time To Act On Health IT

By: Representatives Charles F. Bass and Nancy Johnson  
August 1, 2008

### **COMMENTARY:**

Part of the frustration average Americans feel about Washington stems from its apparent inability to find common-sense solutions to the challenges facing our nation. Congress has a unique opportunity to chip away at that perception by passing health information technology legislation (health IT) that will save lives and reduce health-care costs.

Unfortunately, the window of opportunity for action is closing fast. As the American electorate begins to focus on the November elections, our elected leaders will begin to focus more on politics than policy. Congress needs to act before this window closes completely - inaction will further delay controlling spiraling health-care costs and improving care quality. Indeed, it could cost lives.

Technology has brought us online banking, mobile broadband, and phones that put the power of your desktop computer in the palm of your hand. It is hard to believe that in our increasingly electronic world, our health-care system remains mired in a paper paradigm better fitting the 1950s than the 21st century.

The failure of today's paper-based system exacerbated the impact of Hurricane Katrina. A large number of paper medical records maintained by physicians, hospitals, nursing homes and other health-care facilities in the Gulf Coast region were destroyed. Thousands were left without accurate information about their medical histories and current prescriptions. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, providers and payers using electronic medical records were largely able to preserve their systems and patient information, despite the devastation. Indeed, patients who received treatment through the Veterans Administration, which utilizes electronic health records, were able to access their medical histories and receive lifesaving treatment.

Transitioning from the outdated paper system to a system that better reflects the technology of today will improve the quality of patient care, save our health-care system billions of dollars, and improve security and privacy.

Health IT is essential to the comprehensive reform we need in our health-care system. It allows doctors and patients together to make informed decisions and practice evidence-based medicine. Direct patient care will improve, and health IT will connect health-care professionals with vital medical history in an emergency or when a patient is incapacitated. By providing doctors with accurate, detailed and up-to-date health records

and information, health IT can reduce the nearly 100,000 deaths a year caused by medical errors.

While health IT can be a powerful force improving care quality, it will also save our health-care system billions of dollars. At a time when Congress is looking for ways to reduce costs, health IT would save an estimated \$81 billion a year, according to a study by the independent Rand Corp. It can decrease administrative expenses, increase the time doctors actually spend with patients, and lower health insurance premiums. Passing health IT legislation will result in saving our health-care system hundreds of billions of dollars over the next decade.

While some opponents of health IT have raised concerns about the security and privacy of a new system, in fact the transition away from today's paper-based system will actually improve security and privacy. A paper-based system contains very little real privacy protections. It is impossible for a patient to even know when someone has reviewed his or her medical file. A patient's private records could be looked at, copied and returned to the paper file without anyone else knowing. Health IT will create an electronic audit trail that will show who accessed or attempted to access a patient's records, when they made the attempt, and where.

To enjoy the benefits of health IT, Congress must act now to pass legislation that will lead to creation of standards for easy electronic data exchange between caregivers. Such standards are necessary to create a national system of records that can be accessed and utilized at all points in the health-care system.

Health IT legislation should also include adequate security and privacy protections for patient information without jeopardizing the viability of health IT by exposing providers to unreasonable liability burdens. Finally, health IT legislation should offer financial incentives to encourage adoption of new technology while educating Americans on the value of such new technology.

The time to act is now. American consumers deserve a health-care system that reflects today's technologies. And American voters deserve a Congress that will deliver on cost-saving and lifesaving legislation.

Charles F. Bass, a former member of the U.S. House of Representatives from New Hampshire, is president of the Republican Main Street Partnership. Nancy Johnson, Connecticut Republican, is also a former member of the House.