



## California Must Catch Up On Health Information Technology

By Jim Conran  
The Desert Sun  
September 6, 2008

As California faces budget cuts in Medi-Cal and Children Health Initiatives, the cost and quality of health care is more important than ever. Lawmakers need to make the critical decisions that will save an estimated \$81 billion annually in health care cost by adopting federal health information technology standards.

Recent developments in information technology and in the political arena give Americans the opportunity for an open, diverse and pro-consumer health care market, a market that utilizes cutting-edge technologies to keep prices down, expand choice and improve the quality of care.

Consumers for Competitive Choice represent ordinary people — mothers and fathers, grandparents and parents — who believe in the power of an innovative economy. Health IT is innovation in action: it connects doctors with vital data, it enhances clinical research, it provides unprecedented security and privacy for personal information, and it gives patients historic access to and control over their medical information.

In a recent survey by the California Healthcare Foundation, nearly 70 percent of Californians surveyed said it was important that their physician's office incorporate technology into its practice. While Californians go online for their bank records and other everyday activities, we still rely on the paper and pen system for our health care.

Health IT brings health care providers closer to the data they need to care for their patients. It also provides the highest levels of security and privacy for personal information. For the first time, patients in California and across the country soon will have convenient access to and control over their medical files. But for that to happen, Congress must pass a health IT bill before the year ends.

While Congress deliberates, stories abound about paper records having to be carted from hospital to hospital or even within the same facility before a patient can be treated. For those with particularly pernicious or chronic conditions, carting around stacks of papers inevitably leads to costly, potentially life-threatening delays. Some 98,000 deaths every year are caused by medical errors. The implementation of an effective health IT strategy could help reduce or even eliminate this statistic.

Any health IT bill must include financial incentives for the adoption of the initiative. Communities and institutions that might struggle with the modest costs of health IT need assistance from government and private-public partnerships so that they may get on with the business of keeping America alive and healthy.

When it comes right down to it, consumers will benefit from easier filing of insurance claims and prescriptions because the shuffling of papers under the old system will be virtually eliminated. At the same time, financial savings brought on by the ability of doctors and specialists to freely share information will ultimately show up in households' bottom lines. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, underserved communities, minorities and those far away from health care facilities will have easier access with health IT.

We cannot afford to wait until after the elections. The next Congress will have a raft of new representatives and senators, and there will be a new administration in Washington. That means we start all over from square one. Congress must act now — in this session — to help save lives.

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