

# Give Marylanders benefits of health information technology

By Drew Greenblatt  
August 18, 2008

Health care reform is a divisive issue in Washington, but there is wide agreement on one solution to lower costs and improve care: health information technology, or health IT. Health IT replaces paper medical records with electronic records. This is how I run my Baltimore-based wire basket and hook company; shouldn't my doctor do the same?

The power of information technology is familiar to anyone who pays bills online, buys on Amazon or downloads music on an iPod. My company and other manufacturers use IT systems to track products from assembly line to store shelf, speed delivery to customers, conduct online sales and more. If we can use information technology to reduce waste on the shop floor, we can use it to cut costs in our health care system.

Think about it: When you visit a doctor, the first thing he or she does is pull out a thick paper file containing your medical records. If you visit a specialist, you have to bring a copy of that file or recite it from memory. If you are taken to the emergency room, doctors must make decisions based on little or no information - especially if you're severely injured and need immediate attention.

With health IT, however, all medical records are stored electronically and available worldwide. Every doctor could instantly access medical information - everything from test results to prescriptions to results from X-rays and MRIs.

Obviously, the benefits of health IT go far beyond patient convenience. Every year, nearly 100,000 Americans die because of medical errors - many as a result of doctors who have to make decisions based on medical information that is either incomplete or unavailable. Even something as simple as another doctor's illegible handwriting or an improperly transcribed note can cause a patient to get less than ideal care. Not to mention all the medical tests that are repeated because doctors can't access records or patients can't accurately remember prior test results.

Of course, a balance is required between protecting patient privacy and giving health care professionals access to patient medical information. In fact, health IT offers better security for private medical information through high-tech firewalls and secure data

encryption.

The increased efficiency in treatment made possible by health IT will also help contain rising health care costs - a major concern for business owners, like me, who offer health care coverage. Now, American manufacturers who provide health coverage spend an average of \$2.38 per worker per hour on health care costs - more than double what foreign competitors pay.

Spiraling health care costs have forced many manufacturers to tighten their budgets, making it difficult or impossible to expand our businesses or create jobs. If Congress doesn't act to rein in these costs, American companies will be forced to either scale back on health benefits or shift manufacturing jobs overseas in order to compete.

Health care experts estimate that health IT, coupled with process improvements to give consumers ready access to their private health information, would save nearly \$81 billion every year by reducing duplicate tests, medical errors, unnecessary procedures, hospitalizations, outpatient visits and emergency department expenditures.

Several health IT bills have been introduced in Congress over the past year, but no votes have occurred. Fortunately, Maryland's congressional delegation is well positioned to help move health IT forward.

Maryland can't keep absorbing the entire bill for out-of-control health care costs. We need Congress to act - now.