# HEALTH CARE

# National Strategy Needed to Accelerate the Implementation of Information Technology

## Why GAO Did This Study

Health care is an information-intensive industry that remains highly fragmented and inefficient. Hence, the uses of information technology (IT)—in delivering clinical care, performing administrative functions, and supporting the public health infrastructure—have the potential to yield both cost savings and improvements in the care itself.

In 2003, GAO reported on benefits to health care that could result from using IT—both cost savings and measurable improvements in the delivery and quality of care. GAO also reported on federal agencies' existing and planned information systems intended to support our nation's preparedness for and ability to respond to public health emergencies and the status of health care standards setting initiatives.

The subcommittee has asked GAO to summarize our work on reported benefits of the use of IT for health care delivery and on IT initiatives supporting public health preparedness and response.

## What GAO Found

The use of IT can yield benefits in clinical care and associated administrative functions as well as in public health. Health care organizations reported that electronic medical records (EMR) improved the delivery of care because, among other reasons, more complete medical documentation was available to support the provider's diagnosis. In addition, EMRs could greatly facilitate the reporting of public health information associated with the early detection of and response to disease outbreaks. One hospital replaced outpatients' paper medical charts with EMRs, realizing about $8.6 million in annual savings. This hospital also established electronic access to laboratory results and reports, replacing its manual process for handling medical records and saving another $2.8 million a year. In addition, the lessons learned that were reported to us by health care organizations that have successfully implemented solutions could be used by other organizations to accelerate the adoption of health IT. These lessons recognize the importance of reengineering business processes, gaining users' acceptance of IT, providing adequate training, and making systems secure.

Regarding public health, federal agencies identified 72 existing and planned information systems—34 surveillance systems, 18 supporting technologies, 10 communications systems, and 10 detection systems. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is currently implementing its Public Health Information Network comprised of a number of disease surveillance and communications systems, including the Health Alert Network. This network is an early warning and response system that is intended to facilitate communication among federal, state, and local agencies during public health emergencies. GAO also reported that identification and implementation of health care data, communications, and security standards—which are necessary to support compatibility and interoperability of agencies' various IT systems—remained incomplete across the health care sector. To address the challenges of coordinating the many IT initiatives and implementing a consistent set of standards, GAO recommended last year that the Secretary of Health and Human Services develop a strategy for public health preparedness and response, to include setting priorities for IT initiatives and establishing mechanisms to monitor the implementation of standards throughout the health care industry. Since that time, progress has been made in identifying standards. The Office of Management and Budget's e-government initiative, the Consolidated Health Informatics initiative, has identified a number of standards to be applied to new federal development efforts and modifications of existing systems. This initiative is intended to promote the interoperability of information systems. However, implementing these standards across the federal government is still a work in progress. Until these standards are implemented, information-sharing challenges will remain. In April of this year, Executive Order 13335 established a National Health IT Coordinator and called for a strategic plan to guide the nationwide implementation of interoperable health IT. As this plan moves forward, it will be essential to have continued leadership, clear direction, measurable goals, and mechanisms to monitor progress.