



Highlights of GAO-06-1071T, a testimony before the Subcommittee on Federal Workforce and Agency Organization, Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

As GAO and others have reported, the use of information technology (IT) has enormous potential to improve the quality of health care and is critical to improving the performance of the U.S. health care system. Given the federal government's role in providing health care in the U.S., it has been urged to take a leadership role in driving change to improve the quality and effectiveness of health care, including the adoption of IT. In April 2004, President Bush called for widespread adoption of interoperable electronic health records within 10 years and issued an executive order that established the position of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology. A National Coordinator within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) was appointed in May 2004 and released a framework for strategic action two months later. In May 2005, GAO recommended that HHS establish detailed plans and milestones for each phase of the framework and take steps to ensure that its plans are followed and milestones are met.

GAO was asked to identify progress made by HHS toward the development and implementation of a national health IT strategy. To do this, GAO reviewed prior reports and agency documents on the current status of relevant HHS activities.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-1071T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact David A. Powner at (202) 512-9286 or pownerd@gao.gov.

HEALTH INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

HHS is Continuing Efforts to Define Its National Strategy

What GAO Found

In late 2005, to help define the future direction of a national strategy, HHS awarded several health IT contracts and formed the American Health Information Community, a federal advisory committee made up of health care stakeholders from both the public and private sectors. Through the work of these contracts and the community, HHS and its Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT have made progress in five major areas associated with the President's goal of nationwide implementation of health IT (see table).

Five Areas of Progress and Supporting Activities

Areas of progress	Activities
Advancing use of electronic health records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Defined initial certification criteria for certain electronic health records and certified 22 vendors' products. Presented functional requirements for inclusion of patient information into electronic health records. Initiated work to advance the use of electronic health records to rebuild medical records following disasters.
Establishing interoperability standards for a health information exchange	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> American National Standards Institute Health IT Standards Panel selected 90 interoperability standards for areas such as electronic health records and public health detection and reporting. Coordinated with the National Institute for Standards and Technology to align federal and private sector standards for interoperable health IT.
Developing prototypes of a nationwide health information network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awarded contracts for developing prototypes for a national network to four contractors. Proposed more than 1000 functional requirements. Held the first nationwide health information forum.
Addressing privacy and security issues associated with the nationwide exchange of health information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contracted with 34 states and territories to perform assessments of the impact of policies and laws on security and privacy practices. Selected standards to help ensure privacy and confidentiality. Formed a new workgroup to specifically address privacy and security policy issues. Made recommendations covering topics that are central to challenges for protecting health information privacy in a national health information exchange environment.
Integrating public health systems into a national network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Made recommendations to help support sharing of clinical care data with local, state, and federal biosurveillance programs, including the development of materials for public education on benefits to public health and national security, and the protection of patient confidentiality. Selected information exchange standards for sharing clinical health information with public health.

Source: GAO analysis of HHS data

These activities and others are being used by the Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT to continue its efforts to complete a national strategy to guide the nationwide implementation of interoperable health IT. Since the release of its initial framework in 2004, the office has defined objectives and high-level strategies for accomplishing its goals. Although HHS agreed with GAO's prior recommendations and has made progress in these areas, it still lacks detailed plans, milestones, and performance measures for meeting the President's goals.