

Congress of the United States
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Small Business
2361 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-6315

August 11, 2011

The Honorable Kathleen Sebelius
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20201
Via Facsimile: 202. 690.7380

Dear Secretary Sebelius:

The House Small Business Committee, on which I serve, is required by the Rules of the House to study and investigate the problems of all types of small businesses. This jurisdiction extends to matters concerning small businesses and health care. I chair the Committee's Subcommittee on Healthcare and Technology.

On June 2, 2011, the Subcommittee held a hearing on the barriers to health information technology that are encountered by physicians and other providers in small practices. At the hearing, physicians testified that the cost to purchase and maintain a health IT system, in addition to staff training and downtime during the transition to health IT, are significant burdens for small practices. These barriers were mentioned even by physicians who believe health IT would ultimately benefit their practices. Providers at the hearing also stated their concern about the Medicare reimbursement penalties that will be assessed against providers who do not demonstrate "meaningful use" of health IT by 2015.

One of the frequently mentioned benefits of health IT has been a reduction in medical errors. However, recent news reports have noted incidents of health IT errors. An article in Sunday's *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* cited a baby who was killed when computerized IV equipment prepared a lethal dose of an intravenous sodium chloride solution. The machine did not catch the pharmacy technician's error. The article also noted that when a hepatitis C-positive kidney was accidentally transplanted from a live donor into a recipient, the physician team missed the electronic records alert, and the physicians complained that their electronic records system is cumbersome and difficult to adjust to any one physician's needs.

The Journal of the American Medical Association recently published a study of almost 4,000 computer-generated prescriptions that were received by a pharmacy chain. The report found that 12 percent of the prescriptions contained errors, which, the report said, is consistent with error rates with handwritten prescriptions.

A modern, well-equipped office is critical to the practice of medicine, and health IT offers promise to all medical professionals. Health IT has the potential to improve health care delivery, decrease medical errors, increase clinical and administrative efficiency, and reduce paperwork.

We must do all we can to ensure a commitment to our health care system and patient care. As technology rapidly evolves, I ask that you consider a study of health IT's adoption, benefits and cost effectiveness. As part of the study, I hope you will also consider medical error rates – both human and technological -- so that all errors can be better assessed and prevented.

Sincerely,



Renee Ellmers
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Healthcare and Technology
House Committee on Small Business