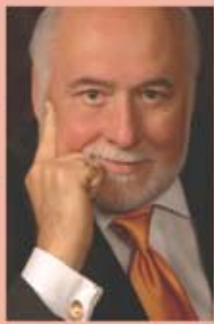


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VIEWPOINT

Economic Stimulus Package Includes Massive New Spending on Health Care

By Ronald M. Hendrickson

The unprecedented spending package signed into law by President Barack Obama on February 17th, with \$787 billion spending and tax cuts, has major implications for health care, including individual providers, with \$150 billion in new spending attached. The huge stimulus package on which the new Administration has hung national hopes for economic revival has as its foundation \$288 billion in tax cuts, the largest item in the measure. In addition to major new Medicaid spending (\$87 billion), extended unemployment benefits and help with healthcare coverage targeted at the unemployed (\$24.7 billion to subsidize private health insurance for people who lose or have lost their jobs), the measure also massively expands healthcare information technology spending, a major item in Obama's campaign platform.

The stimulus initiative includes \$19.2 billion in new spending for health in-

formation technology, with a goal of streamlining healthcare record-keeping and administration and, above all, reducing rampant medical errors that presently cause at least 300,000 unnecessary deaths annually, and cost the US health care system of upwards of 17 percent of all health care costs. It is estimated that pharmaceutical errors alone are costing Americans an estimated \$177 billion each year.

Also incorporated into the stimulus were the provisions in the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health Act (HITECH). This section of the legislation establishes and defines the position of a national coordinator for health information technology, provides \$2 billion for discretionary spending, primarily for grants and loans, and sets a goal of "utilization of a certified electronic health record for each person in the United States by 2014."

At the urging of critics of the current federal HIPAA privacy rule, the HITECH Act significantly expands the privacy

and security standards. Among the key additions to federal privacy policies for health care information, the new law now allows patients to request an "audit trail" showing all electronic disclosures of their health information and mandates that they be notified about any unauthorized disclosure or use.

President Obama is not the first national leader to call for major expansions of electronic health care records. In 2005, President George W. Bush called for a similar effort, although on a vastly smaller scale. "By computerizing health records, we can avoid dangerous medical mistakes, reduce costs and improve care." President Bush stated his goal was to get most Americans connected to electronic records by 2014, the same time frame referenced by President Obama in the stimulus package.

A significant degree of optimism has begun to surround the computerization of health care records, with major hopes for error and cost reductions at the center of Administration objectives. The degree to which these hopes prove to be largely elusive, like managed care will improve quality and reduce health care costs, remain to be seen. What such steps are likely to do, however, are to dramatically increase accountability and responsibility among providers and institutions, since information trails, prescription authority and critical care decisions can all be documented and followed back to who the decision-makers were and when decisions were made.

As one Member of Congress told ICA on this issue, "When a MD scrawls

CONTINUED ON PAGE 14

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