

Health care won't look the same in the future

- **Technology, information will free providers to see more patients.**

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Several converging trends suggest that medical care in the United States is likely to change more over the next decade than it has changed in the past 40 years. The renewed push for health reform needs to focus on harnessing the new realm of opportunities, not solving the problems of the past.

The most significant trend is a true revolution in the scientific foundations of medical practice. Thanks to new understandings of disease at genetic and molecular levels, health care is shifting from the one-size-fits-all medical model of the 20th century to personalized and predictive medicine for the 21st century. More diseases are being understood and treated as chronic conditions to be managed over a patient's lifetime, not as single episodes of acute care.

Stunning improvements in computer and communications technologies are making this medical progress possible. These technologies also provide the foundation for solving many of health care's persistent problems with cost, quality, and access. For example, electronic medication administration systems can virtually eliminate the adverse drug reactions that kill thousands of patients and waste millions of dollars every year. Modern telemedicine systems can bring top-quality care to people in places where medical services would not otherwise be available.

Technology also provides the only viable solutions to serious, growing shortages of health professionals. Electronic medical records can liberate physicians and nurses from the time-consuming tasks of making handwritten notes, allowing them to see more patients each hour. Simulation training tools can teach clinicians new skills in a few hours, alleviating the need to send them away for multi-day courses at distant sites.

Information technologies are also essential in supporting consumers' needs for information to make rational decisions about their health care. Consumerism is a centerpiece of current efforts to improve the overall value of health care in the United States. Consumers with good information about cost, quality and treatment alternatives will be responsible for many of the coming decade's remarkable changes. Providers will need to make their services affordable as consumers are asked to pay a greater portion of their medical bills.

Of course, other forces will also impact the delivery of health care. Globalization (including foreign travel) and cultural, racial and ethnic diversification of the U.S. population will change the demand for health care in several significant ways. Diseases that were almost never seen in the past will become common in the future. Hospitals and medical groups also will be forced into new relationships that align their financial interests.

The current crop of presidential candidates is focusing the reform debate on health insurance, but the opportunities for real improvement lie in using information technology to improve providers' efficiency and effectiveness. Universal access will not solve the system's problems of high costs and uneven quality. Top priority for reform should be creating the infrastructure of computerized medical records and other integrated information systems that can eliminate the waste in health care.

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