

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

Hearing on Sharing of VA/DoD Electronic Health Information

September 24, 2008

Good morning and welcome to today's hearing on the state of health information sharing between the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Defense. Even in the waning days of this Congressional session, we must continue to strive to improve care for servicemembers and veterans. An essential ingredient to reaching that goal is the sharing of personal health care information between the two Departments.

The merits of electronic health records are well documented. While VA is considered to be a leader in using electronic health records, much work remains before the two Departments can achieve the ultimate goal -- the goal of sharing medical information in real time. Until this goal is reached, military and VA medical practitioners simply will not have access to the most accurate personal medical information on their patients.

Technology is not necessarily the problem. The technology exists, as we will see today. Indeed, the electronic health record systems of the two Departments are each remarkable in their own right. The biggest challenge is the development of common standards so the two systems can talk to each other easily and in real time.

DoD and VA have been working toward achieving interoperable systems for over a decade, at a rate that can charitably be described as glacially slow. Only recently has there been significant progress. It appears that, for the first time, there is the needed commitment to full data sharing of electronic medical information and the results of that commitment are visible.

I encourage the Departments to continue to work together in order to extend the progress we have already observed. When VA and DOD finally have the ability to exchange medical information in real time, the best interests of servicemembers and veterans will be served.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today and learning their views on the most effective way forward on this important issue and what this committee can do to reach our shared goal.

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