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## Support grows for e-prescribing

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By **Nancy Ferris**

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It seemed as if someone had decided to declare last week e-Prescribing Week in Washington.

There were rumors that a forthcoming Medicare bill in the Senate Finance Committee would require doctors to use e-prescribing in a trade-off for getting higher fees for their services.

Then a high-level advisory committee recommended that the Health and Human Services Department seek permission from Congress to mandate e-prescribing in Medicare.

Next, the e-Prescribing Controlled Substances Coalition, composed of more than two dozen companies and organizations, sent a letter to President Bush asking the government to remove a major barrier to widespread e-prescribing.

The Senate Judiciary Committee scheduled a hearing this week on that same barrier — the Drug Enforcement Administration's rules that prohibit e-prescribing of controlled substances such as narcotics.

Even the American Medical Association is climbing aboard the e-prescribing bandwagon. In an Oct. 31 letter to senators, it said it "is deeply committed to the adoption of e-prescribing into clinical practice" and proposed steps that the government should take, including financial incentives for doctors.

The American Health Information Community (AHIC), which advises HHS, said not all the necessary groundwork has been laid for a national move to e-prescribing.

It outlined conditions to be met in the next year or two before a mandate could take effect.

All of this work signifies the escalating pressure on the federal government, Congress, and medical and commercial business associations to decide how to get health information technology, and more specifically e-prescribing, adopted nationwide.

There was some opposition to AHIC's recommendations from representatives of doctors, who said the recommendation was too strong, and from insurers, who called it too weak.

HHS Secretary Michael Leavitt, who leads AHIC, had urged the committee to recommend the mandate as part of a strategy for gaining adoption of e-health records. E-prescribing often is described as the easiest and most rewarding element of health IT for doctors, hospitals and pharmacies to adopt.

E-prescribing not only transmits prescriptions electronically from a doctor to

a pharmacy but also eliminates reliance on doctors' notoriously poor handwriting.



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