

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

## HEALTH REFORM BEGINS WITH IMPROVING HEALTH CARE LITERACY

*Become an Original Cosponsor of the "National Health Literacy Act"*

November 19, 2007

Dear Colleague,

As health care reform sits atop our nation's domestic agenda, one critical piece has been missing from the debate. For several years, there has been a growing movement to draw attention to problems associated with low health literacy involving a range of health care stakeholders, leading academics, and government officials. Studies have found that individuals with low health literacy have less understanding of health information, get less preventive health care, and use expensive health services such as the emergency department more frequently. The "National Health Literacy Act" represents the next logical step in this movement by making health literacy a key factor in reforming our health care system and addressing the rising health care costs that our nation faces.

Most people agree that health care consumers should be able to choose their doctor, hospital or insurance provider, yet there is very little attention paid to whether these consumers have the information to make wise health care decisions or understand the information they have received. The "National Health Literacy Act," will expand the consumer's ability to obtain, process, and understand basic health care information and services. This will not only improve our nation's overall health, but also save our health care system billions of dollars. Evidence has shown that low health literacy contributes to medical errors, lowers quality of care, and results in poorer health outcomes. All of these factors are inextricably linked to the rise of health care costs and should be a major focus area in the health reform debate.

According to the Institute of Medicine's groundbreaking report "Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion," approximately 90 million adults in America have limited health literacy. This is particularly important for the Medicare and Medicaid populations, since data has shown that low health literacy rates disproportionately affect low-income and elderly Americans. To address this costly issue, our legislation would:

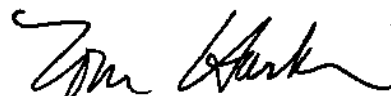
- Require the Secretary of Health and Human Services to establish within the Agency for Health care Research and Quality (AHRQ) a Health Literacy Implementation Center. This "Center" would gather and disseminate resources and best practices, sponsor demonstration projects, coordinate research, assist other federal agencies, and set national health literacy strategies and goals.
- Establish state-based health literacy resource centers to identify and understand health literacy challenges in the applicable state or region, coordinate public and private efforts to deliver health literacy services, and provide technical and policy assistance to state and local governments.

We hope you will join us as a cosponsor of this important legislation. As we seek to empower the public to make wise health care decisions, we must begin by making sure they understand how to navigate the American health care system. To become an original co-sponsor of the "National Health Literacy Act," or if you have any questions, please contact Andrew McKechnie with Senator Coleman (4-5641) or Jenelle Krishnamoorthy with Senator Harkin (4-3254).



Norm Coleman

Sincerely,



Tom Harkin