

## Telemedicine alliance aims to educate policymakers

By [Mohana Ravindranath](#), Published: May 23, 2014

At a recent medical technology conference in a Senate office building, University of Michigan professor Rashid Bashshur presented a study showing that telemedicine — virtual medical care — can reduce the length of hospital stays and number of emergency visits.

The study was sponsored by the [Alliance for Connected Care](#), a medical technology advocacy group led by former senators Tom Daschle (D-S.D.), Trent Lott (R-Miss.) and John Breaux (D-La.). Bashshur reviewed medical literature about cases of congestive heart failure, stroke and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Although virtual treatment often reduced time with physicians, he said, it sometimes led to an increase in appointments with nurses.

Last week's conference was one of the group's first attempts to educate policymakers about telemedicine. It demonstrated medical technology — including video systems that can enable a physician in an urban hospital to monitor a patient in a rural one — and urged lawmakers to adapt regulations to accommodate it.

State regulation of medical licenses, for example, may prohibit physicians from treating patients or prescribing medicine without an in-person visit. And not all government insurance programs reimburse patients, or incentivize physicians, for telemedicine services, according to the group.

Specialists on Call, based in Reston, schedules on-call physicians to virtually consult with patients across the country. Chief executive Joe Peterson said the company spends a large sum of money navigating the state licensing laws that he hopes will be simplified.

Sens. John Thune (R-S.D.) and Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) also spoke at the conference. “The need to update the law is something we need to make sure gets out on the playing field,” said Wyden, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee. He added that policymakers should “move the machinery of government around” to allow for a more modern outlook on health.

Allowing physicians to practice virtually could lead to innovation, Thune said, and could connect patients to specialists they might not otherwise be able to see. But, he noted, the United States is “locked into a reimbursement system under Medicare that has prevented some of those advancements in digital medicine.”

WellPoint, Verizon, CVS Caremark and others showcased video monitors and medical devices at the conference.