

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SB 6704

As Reported By House Committee On:

Energy & Utilities

Title: An act relating to the use of telecommunications in the medical industry.

Brief Description: Relating to the use of telecommunications in the medical industry.

Sponsors: Senator Sutherland.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Energy & Utilities: 2/20/96, 2/21/96 [DP].

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY & UTILITIES

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 9 members: Representatives Casada, Chairman; Crouse, Vice Chairman; Hankins, Vice Chairman; Patterson, Ranking Minority Member; Poulsen, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Chandler; Kessler; Mastin and Mitchell.

Staff: Margaret Allen (786-7110).

Background: Telemedicine is a system of health care delivery that uses telecommunication technology to connect primary care physicians, specialists, and patients. For example, over long geographic distances, a specialist can visually and verbally interact with a patient or the patient's primary physician, retrieve or store information in the patient's electronic file, and photograph or visually examine areas of the patient's body.

Proponents believe telemedicine can increase the access patients in rural communities, or in specialized populations such as institutions, have to health care providers, decrease the geographic and professional isolation of rural physicians, and improve continuity of care. Proponents also suggest that in addition to improved health care delivery, the use of telemedicine would result in tremendous reductions in medical-related travel and expenses.

It is currently unknown to what extent rural areas in the state have sufficient telecommunications infrastructure to take advantage of telemedicine. Also, there are additional issues such as questions of liability, privacy, and insurance coverage.

Summary of Bill: The Legislature finds modern telecommunications may improve the health of citizens, especially in rural areas, but that a range of telemedicine issues need to be examined before telemedicine is likely to become widespread.

By November 1, 1997, the state Board of Health must complete a study on the current and potential use of telemedicine in the state, and report its findings to the legislative committees that cover telecommunications and health issues, the Secretary of the Department of Health, and the Governor.

The study is to include (1) the nature and extent of current telemedicine use within the state; (2) the location and types of facilities within the state that would benefit from increased telemedicine availability; (3) the operating standards and characteristics most commonly employed in telemedicine equipment and projected trends in telemedicine system performance standards; (4) any legal or institutional barriers to expanding the use of telemedicine within the state; (5) recommended changes in rules and statutes; and (6) any other findings or recommendations the state Board of Health considers relevant and necessary concerning the development of intrastate and interstate telemedicine networks.

For the purpose of the study, "telemedicine" is defined as technology allowing the exchange of medical information for the purpose of facilitating diagnoses, including but not limited to transmittal of images, test results, diagnostic results, and other medical data or medical information to or from a physician or other health professional at a location remote from the patient being examined.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Testimony For: Telemedicine has the potential to be extremely helpful to rural hospitals. Medical practitioners in some rural areas of the state currently use telecommunications technology to transmit medical test results to urban medical centers. It would be preferable for the University of Washington School of Medicine to conduct the study rather than the Board of Health, as the school currently is involved in telemedicine projects.

Testimony Against: None.

Testified: Senator Sutherland, prime sponsor; Rob Menaul, Washington State Hospital Association; and Carl Nelson, Washington State Medical Association.