

# Rural nursing homes are falling behind in health information technology

December 13 2016, by Sheena Rice

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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 1 million older Americans depend on nursing homes for their health care. The 16,000 nursing homes in the United States serve populations of all sizes; yet, according to new research from the University of Missouri, rural communities are lagging in health information technology (IT) needed to improve quality, safety and efficiency in health care. This gap could have implications for patient care as nursing homes in rural areas may have less capacity to exchange information with hospitals to ensure high-quality transitions in care.

"Previous studies demonstrate that IT sophistication can improve health outcomes for patients, such as reducing hospitalizations," said Greg Alexander, professor in the Sinclair School of Nursing. "The benefits of IT sophistication do not differ based on geography; however, in this national assessment, we found a significant gap in IT sophistication between rural and urban areas."

The study is the first national assessment of nursing home IT use since 2004. The researchers found that [nursing homes](#) located in metropolitan areas had greater IT laboratory capabilities for resident registration and admission. Urban nursing homes also were better at conducting and verifying medical tests, which can impact and improve patient care.

"As competition for experienced [health care](#) IT professionals increases in [urban areas](#), rural health care organizations are finding it difficult to compete for needed talent," Alexander said. "Policy makers need to be

aware of the unique challenges facing rural health organizations and provide the necessary incentives to help rural nursing homes improve their IT sophistication. Improvement of IT sophistication will lead to better patient outcomes and a better quality of life for nursing home residents."

Alexander recently received a Fulbright U.S. Scholar program grant to Australia from the U.S. Department of State and the J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board. The grant will be used to study health informatics in nursing homes. He will be studying IT sophistication and quality measures at Macquarie University as part of a project to improve [patient care](#) in Australia's nursing homes.

"The state of nursing home information technology sophistication in rural and non-rural US markets," was published recently in the *Journal of Rural Health*. The research was supported by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (R01HS022497). The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the funding agencies.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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