

Puget Sound Health Alliance: We 'have work to do' on patients' care

by Peter Neurath Contributing Writer, Puget Sound Business Journal, 02/01/08

New data produced by the Puget Sound Health Alliance about how well doctors in the Puget Sound region care for patients give everyone a tool to improve health care -- and thereby hold down surging medical costs, which have been hammering employers and governments alike. The Alliance's first Community Checkup, based on care provided to some 1.6 million patients during the past 12 months, shows that collectively doctors in the five-county Puget Sound region need to improve care for such patients as those afflicted with diabetes and heart disease.

"Bottom line," said the Alliance in a statement, "we all have work to do to make sure patients, especially those with chronic conditions, get the basic care that doctors agree is most effective."

Formed in 2004, the Alliance is a nonprofit organization, with some 160 member organizations, with a mission to promote health and improve quality. For instance, the checkup, which the Alliance will post online and distribute widely, shows improvement is needed in caring for patients with heart disease or diabetes.

Across the region, according to the Alliance, physicians for one reason or another failed to check cholesterol levels for about 20 percent of their patients with heart disease or diabetes. This holds significance not only for the health of those patients but also for the medical costs of caring for those whose conditions worsen.

Margaret Stanley, the Alliance's executive director, said more than 60 percent of all health-care costs result from medical care for people with chronic illnesses.

Diabetics, for instance, are prone to heart disease, kidney disease, blindness and loss of limbs.

If this report and succeeding larger reports are widely used by doctors, patients, employers and health insurers, the Alliance believes enormous cost savings will result.

Consider generic drugs. Last year, only 40 percent of patients filled cholesterol-lowering prescriptions with a generic medication, but if 50 percent had done so, the Alliance figures the region would have saved \$7 million.

The numbers for depression seem pretty depressing. Just under 60 percent of patients stayed on antidepressant medication for at least 12 weeks, only about 40 percent stayed on for at least 6 months, and barely over 20 percent of those on medications received follow-up care. Yet the costs of improperly treated depression are huge, said Dr. Michelle Seelig, the Alliance's director of health information. The indirect costs, such as those linked to back pain and headaches, total billions of dollars a year.

The Alliance sees its reports as useful for employers. They can counsel employees to ask their doctors better questions, for instance, and they can talk to their health insurers about providing incentives to doctors to improve the quality of medical care. "Tools like this can create a common set of quality benchmarks for large health-care purchasers" such as The Boeing Co. and the state, said Steve Hill, a former Weyerhaeuser executive who is now director of the state Health Care Authority.

The Alliance's first checkup reports the regionwide averages for 21 basic medical-treatment measures in the areas of diabetes, heart disease, depression, low back pain and generic drugs. And it compares 14 large clinic groups with the scores of all doctors in the five-county region of King, Snohomish, Pierce, Thurston and Kitsap counties. For instance, the regional rate of checking blood-sugar levels on 45,625 patients was 88 percent. Some of the Everett Clinic's sites scored as high as 92 percent, and all scored as well or better than the 88 percent level. Swedish Physicians, with 11 sites, scored 92 percent. For statistical validity, only clinic sites with at least six doctors and 250 patients were scored individually.

The Alliance is at pains to underscore that the report is not a "report card" to judge who's done badly and who's done well. Doctors, for example, can urge patients to come in for tests or to take medications; if patients refuse to comply, it's not the clinics' fault, but their scores will not reflect that. "No single doctor, clinic, patient or insurer can fix the health care system alone," the Alliance says. "Everyone has a role in making necessary improvements."