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## Health alliance leading way to reform, locally

A local effort to do what has become all but impossible at the national level get a handle on rising health-care costs while improving the quality of care is making serious inroads.

If you haven't heard of The Puget Sound Health Alliance, take note. It's a nearly 2-year-old partnership of those who use, pay for and provide health care that's working to stem rising costs by using market-based incentives to improve the efficiency and quality of care. More than 100 organizations have joined, including the region's county governments, the cities of Seattle and Everett, hospitals and clinics, major employers including the Boeing Co., large health-insurance providers and drug manufacturers.

Its vision: A state-of-the-art health-care system that provides better care at a more affordable cost, resulting in healthier people.

That's a tall order, given a culture of health-care delivery where competing interests often keep participants from working together. But alliance members understand that if this massive system is to change, everyone in it must be involved, pursuing the same goals and gaining each other's trust.

Research has found that in the Puget Sound area, 41 percent of the time the health-care system provides services that are not consistent with recommended standards for quality care that improves health. Simply getting everyone on the same page by agreeing on care guidelines that are known to work is a necessary first step.

It's being taken. Alliance members have adopted evidence-based care guidelines for diabetes and heart disease, and are identifying how they'll measure the quality of care in those areas. Next, they'll tackle prescription drugs, back pain and depression.

Adopting a performance-based payment system for providers is also part of the alliance's strategy. Current fee-for-service structures reward volume, but not quality. The alliance plans eventually to issue reports comparing health-care quality and cost in the region, sort of a Consumer Reports of the health-care system.

The alliance is also working to reduce the influence pharmaceutical companies have over which drugs doctors prescribe. In that area, the alliance is following the lead of The Everett Clinic, which long ago closed its doors to drug company sales reps. The result should be wider use of less-costly generic drugs.

These are sensible and fairly simple ideas. Best of all, they'll work. As it has in so many ways in the past, the Puget Sound region is leading the nation in health-care innovation.