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Local health care 'checkup' finds room for improvement

Survey looked at patients, clinics in 5 counties

By [CHERIE BLACK](#), P-I REPORTER, 2/1/08

In an effort to identify areas in local health care that need improving, the **Puget Sound Health Alliance** conducted a "community checkup" of 1.6 million patients, finding that many measures were below standard. Results of that checkup were released Thursday, with alliance members calling the findings a baseline to begin changing care for the better. But some physicians wonder if any more will be done besides gathering and handing out data.

The report looks at 21 types of care provided to patients in King, Pierce, Snohomish, Kitsap and Thurston counties in the areas of diabetes, heart disease, depression, low back pain, use of generic drugs, use of antibiotics and prevention. Information was taken from 81 clinics that volunteered to be included in the study -- which include about 70 percent of the insured, non-Medicare population in the five-county region -- between January 2004 and December 2006.

The report, which cost the alliance \$1.1 million, is a "starting point with which to improve," said Margaret Stanley, executive director of the alliance. "You can't improve what you don't measure and the more we improve quality, the more we can avoid misuse of services," she said.

Fewer than half of residents over 50 in the counties surveyed have received recommended preventive care, such as screening for colorectal cancer, mammograms, Pap smears and flu shots, according to the report. About 40 percent of patients between 51 and 53 received recommended colon cancer screenings, and 20 percent of patients diagnosed with heart disease or diabetes did not have their cholesterol checked at least once during the year assessed, the report said.

But some physicians questioned how consumer-friendly the results will be and if anything beyond talking about the findings will be done. Dr. Warren Fein, medical director of Swedish Physicians, said there is a fine print to many of the findings, such as the cost of screenings that may not be covered by insurance, which could result in lower compliance from consumers, or comparing a clinic in a low-income area to one in a more affluent area. "You can show people numbers, but what are we going to do with those numbers?" he asked. "It's a great start, but the value is to build on consumer education."

A second report looking at a wider pool of patients and measures will be released in July, said King County Executive Ron Sims, who founded the Puget Sound Health Alliance in 2004 to analyze how to reform health care and control costs. He said the goal of the studies will be to create an online database by next year where consumers can compare outcomes and health care facilities in the region and make better decisions about care. "Consumers are our best asset, and we want them to make better decisions," Sims said. "If consumers do their part and physicians do their part, we'll have better health coverage."

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