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Making wise health care decisions should be easier

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Choosing your doctor and your health care are some of the most important decisions you will make for you and your family. Currently, people have more information about how to choose a computer or car. We can do better. Unfortunately, there has been little agreement about how best to collect, evaluate and share essential information about health care quality and efficiency. Yet that's the information we all need to choose the most effective, affordable health care.

The Puget Sound Health Alliance, a non-profit, public-private coalition of patients, doctors, hospitals, businesses, health plans and government, has taken an important step toward placing powerful information in the hands of patients, physicians, employers and others in the region. Using a sizable financial contribution from King County, the Alliance will produce a public report comparing quality of care in local medical clinics and hospitals to help drive more effectiveness and efficiency.

A study done by the Rand Corp. revealed that more than 40 percent of patients in this area don't receive care that is consistent with widely accepted, national standards for quality care. These standards reflect effective care patients ought to receive -- such as mammograms, immunizations and other preventive measures, and such services as blood glucose (sugar) tests and foot exams for people with diabetes. Simply put, this means about 40 cents of every dollar spent on health care doesn't improve health.

Comparison reports will help employers, doctors and insurers work together with consumers to save that 40 cents. That means better care at a more affordable cost. Consumers will use the report to choose providers who offer effective and efficient care. Doctors must have confidence in this report and be able to use it to improve patient care. Employers and insurers must be able to use the report to design benefit plans that cover and reimburse providers for the most effective treatments.

For the first time, the Alliance will make available one regional comparison report that is truly useful to doctors, employers, insurers and consumers. A number of health plans have paved the way by evaluating health care quality based on their own data. However, definitions and measures used by each health plan differ, so a single medical clinic or hospital may receive inconsistent performance results from different health plans. The Alliance will create one consistent report for the region, based on data from all health plans. It will use quality measures drawn from commonly accepted national standards that have been reviewed and confirmed by local physicians.

The comprehensive reports can be used by doctors to see what the nationally recommended standard of care is and measure their own performance against it. Armed with this information about the most effective treatments based on guidelines supported by the medical community, doctors can more consistently deliver effective care throughout the region.

Comparison reports put information in the hands of employers and insurers so they can design health benefits that cover effective treatments, in addition to structuring payments to providers that reward high-quality, high-value care. With the power of information and the right incentives, doctors will be empowered to provide effective, efficient care.

Ultimately, consumers can use the reports to know where to get quality care. They can see who is following the evidence-based standards, what the health outcomes are and which clinics and hospitals have the most satisfied patients. Only by recognizing, promoting and rewarding effective, efficient, high-quality care will we improve the health care system.

Neither the data collected by the Alliance nor the communitywide reports comparing local clinics and hospitals will identify individual patients. The reports will be available starting in early 2007, with quarterly updates.

The bottom line is that everyone will be able make more informed decisions. This informational "power" will fuel actions and discussions both here and across the country to help ensure that people have access to effective and efficient care that promotes good health.

The non-profit Puget Sound Health Alliance is creating practical, local solutions for health care improvement, with an initial focus on King, Kitsap, Pierce, Snohomish and Thurston counties.

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