

Alliance to offer reports comparing quality and cost of health care providers

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Soon, you're likely be able to shop for hospitals and doctors the way you shop for cars – armed with the latest information on how they stack up against the competition, both in quality and cost. The **Puget Sound Health Alliance**, a group made up of about 130 area businesses and government employers, plans to release this spring the first in a series of reports comparing area hospitals and clinics. Reports comparing doctors are to start in 2008.

The initial reports will compare how often providers do what medical experts say they should do, such as regularly check diabetics' blood sugar to adjust medications if needed. The idea of many of the standards is to prevent costly complications down the road such as kidney failure and amputations in the case of diabetics.

Information comparing costs will come later, maybe wrapped up in an "efficiency measure" or even straight reporting of who charges what for a given procedure, said alliance spokeswoman Diane Giese. The goal is to cut employers' medical costs by turning employees into smarter, more cost-conscious medical shoppers.

Anyone who worries about medical bills in King, Pierce, Snohomish, Kitsap and Thurston counties should benefit from the group's efforts because the reports will be on the alliance's Web site and in libraries, Giese said.

The alliance's efforts got a major boost Wednesday when the secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Mike Leavitt, named the alliance as the nation's first "Community Leader for Value-driven Health Care." The designation opens the door for the alliance to use the federal government's vast trove of Medicare data to compare facilities and physicians, in addition to the insurance company claims data the group is already using.

"The Puget Sound Health Alliance has demonstrated outstanding leadership in working to bring about high-quality care and better value for the citizens of this region," Leavitt told his audience at Starbucks Center in Seattle.

As a buyer of medical care for 50 million people through Medicare and other programs, the federal government is, like the alliance, interested in helping people get the most from their medical dollars. To that end, Leavitt and his department are knitting together the efforts of many groups similar to the alliance scattered across the United States. "I am proud to recognize this organization as a pioneer organization in the nationwide network that we are building," Leavitt said.

There's already been some friction with the medical community over efforts to turn patients into bargain hunters. Last May, Regence Blue Shield told the Boeing employees using Regence services that it was excluding 500 doctors from a proposed network because they did not meet quality standards. The doctors were not warned beforehand.

Six of those doctors and the Washington State Medical association sued Regence for libel, slander, interference with the doctor-patient relationship and other things, said Tom Curry, chief executive of the doctors' group. Regence dropped its plan to form the network, but the lawsuit remains. "We didn't communicate appropriately," said Regence spokesman Charlie Fleet. "We acknowledge that."

To avoid such problems, the alliance has been working closely with area doctors and hospitals to decide how medical care and cost information should be assessed and shared with the public. One thing that's already certain is that providers will know well before the public what will be in the alliance's reports.

"There always will be a natural tension between those who collect data and those who give care," Curry said. "But doctors, as a science-based profession, know this is going to happen. It's a macro-economic trend. Our objective is to make this as fair and accurate as possible."

The Puget Sound Health Alliance Web site is www.pugetsoundhealthalliance.org.