

Olympia gives patients more say over surgery

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Washington is the first state that will experiment with giving medical patients more information and say-so about choosing whether to undergo surgery in cases where it's not clear that cutting is the best course. Supporters of this process, called "shared decision making," say that not only does it increase patient satisfaction but also lowers medical costs, since informed patients tend to avoid surgery for such conditions as benign prostate enlargement, early stage prostate and breast cancers, and chronic back pain.

"Savings result from fewer or less costly procedures" said Sen. Cheryl Pflug, R-Maple Valley, who successfully pressed for legislation directing the state Health Care Authority to set up a shared-decision demonstration project. The Health Care Authority (HCA) runs the state's Basic Health Plan, which subsidizes coverage for the working poor, and oversees health insurance for state employees. The HCA will arrange for demonstration projects at one or more multispecialty medical practices.

The Foundation for Informed Medical Decision Making, in Boston, lauds Washington as the first state "to endorse the benefit" of doctors and patients using the process of shared decision making. The Foundation says this process involves doctors explaining the risks and benefits of treatment alternatives, and patients using decision aids -- booklets, tapes, DVDs -- in considering treatment alternatives in view of their values and preferences.

Dr. John Wennberg, the Foundation's co-founder, called Washington's legislation "groundbreaking." The Legislature's decision to test the benefits of shared decision making drew praise from Dr. Hugh Maloney, president of the Washington State Medical Association: "Such common sense legislation puts into practice something that is realistic, practical and helps physicians serve our patients and our profession, as we seek the highest standards of medical care."

Though shared decision making apparently is becoming more topical, it's been around for a while. Karen Merrikin, public policy executive director at **Group Health Cooperative**, of Seattle, said that in the early 1990s there was a lot of controversy about how to treat enlarged prostates, so Group Health gave patients a decision aid to help them decide between surgery and watchful waiting.