

King County Council should help pay for health-care reports

by George Erb, Editor

Our health-care system has many shortcomings, but among the most insidious is its lack of transparency.

Comparable measurements of hospitals and clinics are either unavailable or indecipherable for most health-care consumers, from working parents to corporate benefits administrators. Which central Puget Sound hospital has the best track record for diagnosing and treating diabetes? Who knows? What physicians' clinic in our region provides the best services for the most value? It's a mystery.

Fortunately, a partnership of employers, insurers and others is addressing the problem. The Puget Sound Health Alliance, a nonpartisan nonprofit, is on the verge of shining some much-needed light on our health-care system.

The Metropolitan King County Council is considering whether to help the Alliance pay for a series of public performance reports on hospitals and clinics in a five-county area. We believe the money would be well spent, and we hope the council agrees.

Today's consumers are awash with information about goods and services. Price and performance comparisons are readily available for such things as automobiles, dishwashers and home mortgages. But when it comes to shopping for health care, we're too often in the dark.

Earlier this year, the Alliance conducted an unscientific survey of nearly 2,900 people, most of them central Puget Sound residents. Less than half said they had enough information to find the best doctors and hospitals.

Too often, we simply resort to wishful thinking. Many consumers believe their doctors and hospitals are superior to the rest of the nation, a 2004 study by the Rand Corp. wryly noted. Yet the study failed to find a single community that was consistently above average in the treatment of several chronic conditions. For example, the study discovered that patients nationwide failed to get the recommended level of care for their ailments 46 percent of the time. So much for the notion that all doctors and hospitals are above average.

Closer to home, the Alliance wants to build a health-care database with information taken from insurance claims. The assembled data would be the basis for quarterly reports on the quality of care and cost for hospitals and clinics in King, Kitsap, Pierce, Snohomish and Thurston counties.

This initiative will empower health-care consumers and help them make more informed decisions. Just as important, it will subject hospitals and clinics to market forces that reward quality and efficiency, and punish inadequacy.

In the coming weeks, the county council is expected to vote on whether to spend \$1.3 million on this project over the next three years. The right vote on this spending measure is "yes."