

State, U.S. to launch new health-care effort

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by Peter Neurath

National and local political and business leaders Wednesday announced efforts to improve the quality of health care and to lower health-care costs.

Speaking in Seattle, Mike Leavitt, secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, tapped the Puget Sound Health Alliance as the nation's first designated "community leader for value-driven health care."

Together with six similar organizations elsewhere, the Puget Sound Health Alliance will form the beginning of a national network of local organizations that will use standardized measures to assess the quality of care delivered by physicians and hospitals and will then publicly report the results.

As it is, said Leavitt, patients know nothing about doctor and hospital quality and prices.

Gov. Chris Gregoire said she will propose that the state pay \$2 million to fund statewide collection of health-care claims data to augment the collection of claims data by the Puget Sound Health Alliance. The alliance will apply quality standards to these data to measure health-care quality.

Margaret Stanley, the alliance's executive director, said that this year the alliance will for the first time publish a report on how medical groups in this region compare in quality on 23 measures covering the care of chronic diseases such as cancer and diabetes, back pain and depression. The report also will judge doctors' practices on preventive care and prescription drugs, and it will compare medical groups on how efficiently they treat patients.

The thrust of these efforts is that by giving consumers information about doctor and hospital quality and prices, they can make informed decisions about buying health care, just as they do now when buying cars and other consumer goods.

Doctors and hospitals will gain information on how they measure up in comparison with their peers, and presumably this will drive them to improve the quality of the care they provide.

It's now widely believed that as quality is improved, the rate of health-care cost increases will slow, since timely medical care done right the first time is less expensive than correcting for unnecessary, inadequate and inappropriate care.

Rapidly increasing health-care costs are badly straining corporate, federal, state and local budgets.

Gregoire said about 60 percent of Washington residents depend on the state to pay for their health care, such as Medicaid and state employees' health-care costs.