



Report card grades region's health care clinics

Pierce County cancer screening, depression follow-ups score below average

M. ALEXANDER OTTO, Tacoma News Tribune, February 1st, 2008 06:52 AM

About three years ago, Puget Sound-area business and government leaders came together to figure out ways to save on health insurance by keeping their employees healthy. With the help of the medical community, they formed a group called the **Puget Sound Health Alliance**, and started crunching data from employees' health insurance claims – which record what kind of care they get – to determine where improvements could be made. The goal was to see how often patients got the treatments that experts at the National Institutes of Health and elsewhere said they should receive to stay as healthy as possible.

The group's first annual report card came out Thursday. It analyzed outpatient claims data for 1.6 million people in Pierce, Thurston, King, Kitsap and Snohomish counties, and concluded that there's room for improvement.

That's especially so in Pierce County, where clinics fell slightly behind regional averages on prescribing generic drugs instead of expensive brand names, screening for breast and cervical cancers, and following-up with people diagnosed with depression. Clinics in Pierce County were slightly better on one measure, making sure kids with sore throats were screened for strep before getting an antibiotic, to ensure they really do have an infection that antibiotics can help.

The Health Alliance looked at 21 measures related to diabetes, heart disease, depression and low back pain, plus preventive care and the appropriate use of generic drugs and antibiotics. Overall, departures from recommended care levels in Pierce County were slight, and no county or clinic did what experts recommend 100 percent of the time.

The main finding of Thursday's report, said Alliance spokeswoman Diane Giese, is that "everybody has room to improve." The goal of the report card was to establish a regional baseline to see exactly what needs to be done. "The next step is to dig a little deeper to see what's behind the numbers," Giese said. Hospitals will be included in future analyses.

With employers facing ever-increasing health insurance costs, similar work is going on nationwide, she said, and the results for the Puget Sound area are not that different than what's been found elsewhere. Across the country, "there's way too much underuse, overuse and misuse," of medical care, said Giese.

Already, employers are using the information to ensure insurance companies cover preventive care, and that co-payments aren't prohibitively high for patients. Employers also want to educate consumers about what they and their doctors should be doing to preserve health. To help meet that last goal, Thursday's report is full of information for people about how the conditions it covers should be treated. "We want to avoid having someone in the hospital with a heart attack or amputated limb because their diabetes wasn't managed," Giese said.

That thinking has resonated in the Puget Sound area. Today, the group has grown to 160 members from the region's health care, business, government and labor sectors.

Claims data for Thursday's report came from Group Health, Premera Blue Cross, Regence Blue Shield, The Boeing Co. and 10 other organizations. It included claims data for Pierce County employees, who are covered either by Regence or Group Health, said Betsy Sawyers, head of the county's human resources

department. Thursday's report will help employees and employers make sure insurance is "structured in such a way to support these best clinical practices," she said.

It will also help Pierce County doctors, said Dr. Smokey Stover, a senior vice president at MultiCare Health System who oversees doctors and other providers. In the case where one of MultiCare's clinics ranks low on a given measure, Stover said, "I won't be at all hesitant to call colleagues" in other counties and ask "How did you solve this problem?" Stover was on the committee that oversaw how the alliance data was analyzed. He said one reason county clinics have fallen a bit behind on generic drug use is that providers in Pierce County haven't been aggressive about excluding drug (company salesmen) from clinics. The free samples benefit patients, but also might channel them into taking more expensive drugs. "It's something we are struggling with," Stover said.

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Thursday's report, "Puget Sound Community Checkup: A Report to the Community on Health Care Performance Across the Region," is available at www.wacommunitycheckup.org.