

Report cards on health care

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In dramatic fashion, executives of some of Puget Sound's largest businesses and health concerns stood together last week and signed a pledge to help produce the nation's first public report cards rating health care. The symbolic gesture of business competitors pledging to work together to reduce health-care costs and improve quality was joined by the political might of a Bush administration Cabinet secretary, Gov. Christine Gregoire and King County Executive Ron Sims.

Together it adds up to a powerful and potentially significant effort. The **Puget Sound Health Alliance**, made up of businesses, insurers and government agencies, plans to create a "Consumer Report" for health care. Not only will the likes of Microsoft, Starbucks and Group Health Cooperative pool and compare information, but Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt has offered Medicare's huge database.

The consumer benefits are obvious. Information about patient care and medical outcomes at hospitals and clinics would be contained in a central location, easily accessible to consumers. A single report drawn from health-care plans throughout the region, using identical quality standards and measurements, would be a tremendous tool. Reports are expected to be available starting in early 2007, with quarterly updates.

Competition spurred by the reports wouldn't be bad for business, either. Hospital A will discover Hospital B performs a procedure far better and cheaper. Rather than cede a lucrative market, Hospital A will likely move toward strategies for improvement. A critical look at the nation's health-care system is overdue. Runaway costs and the growing problem of the uninsured demand attention.

Each biennium, the state Legislature pays the growing cost of health care by cadging money from other essential needs, such as education and infrastructure. This is unsustainable; serious policy changes must be made. For now, the Health Alliance's planned report cards represent a big step in the right direction.