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A path to better health

While state and federal elected officials are planning major surgery on the nation's health-care system, a local group is starting with a shrewder approach: taking the patient's temperature.

The **Puget Sound Health Alliance** last week released "**Community Checkup**," its first report on the effectiveness of the health care people are getting compared to the best, most cost-efficient practices. Among the measurements were how often people were receiving mammograms or colonoscopies and tests that help manage chronic diseases, such as diabetes; and, how often they were getting tests, drugs or procedures that were not necessary. Really, why do surgery for lower-back pain instead of physical therapy when outcomes for both treatments are approximately the same?

Begun in 2004 at the suggestion of a King County task force, the alliance now includes about 160 organizations, including large and small employers, municipalities, insurers and health-care providers. The goal is to improve health-care quality and stem escalating costs. The results? The patient — 14 Puget Sound clinics, so far — is doing fairly well, but some treatment modifications are indicated.

Using billing data from participating clinics — patient identities were not shared — the alliance studied and reported clinics' performance in several areas, including heart disease, depression and lower-back pain. Some did better than others. Regardless, they all should be commended for participating in this effort.

Already, some clinic directors report changes in treatment approaches based on the results — and not one lawmaker had to vote. While legislation will be required to tackle the larger challenges facing the health-care system, the Puget Sound Health Alliance has started the region down an important path to making common-sense changes that improve the quality of health care and rein in the costs, to boot.