

Millions granted to improve health care *Puget Sound area part of 14-site collaboration*

On the heels of a nationwide study pointing to major discrepancies in patient care in hospitals across the U.S., the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation pledged \$1 million to the Puget Sound Health Alliance to help improve health care quality.

In all, the foundation will provide \$300 million over four years to 14 sites across the country.

Officially called "Aligning Forces for Quality," the foundation partnered with the Puget Sound Health Alliance on Thursday in making the announcement at Seattle University. At the same time, 13 other sites chosen for the program, including Willamette Valley, Ore., Detroit, Cleveland and Memphis, Tenn., joined the launch by satellite.

Called by Dr. Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, president and chief executive officer of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, "the most ambitious initiative ever," the program will focus on communities and ways to improve the quality of health care, reduce racial and ethnic disparities and provide models for national reform.

The Puget Sound Health Alliance will receive its \$1 million over three years, with the possibility of receiving more money later.

"Our health care in this country continues to fail us," Lavizzo-Mourey said via satellite from Washington, D.C. "Studies have shown us staggering inefficiencies in care when we need it. Health care is delivered locally and that's where the fires need to be."

The 14 sites will collaborate and share what changes and improvements are working and what aren't, hoping to come up with a plan that can work for everyone, said Dr. David Fleming, chairman of the alliance.

The groups pointed to statistics released last week in the 2008 Dartmouth Atlas of Health Care study, which looked at more than 4 million Medicare patients during the last two years of their lives at nearly 3,000 hospitals across the country from 2001 through 2005.

The study showed glaring disparities in treatment depending on patients' race and where they live. Though Seattle ranked on the lower, more conservative end of the spectrum when treating patients, the alliance wants to use that data and other figures to determine how to provide better health care to Seattle area patients.

For example, African-Americans in Seattle with diabetes and peripheral vascular disease undergo leg amputations nearly four times more often than whites, according to the study.

"This is really about an increased emphasis on the differences in care and changing that and moving forward," Fleming said.

News of local disparities is familiar to members of the alliance, which was founded in 2004 by County Executive Ron Sims to analyze how to reform health care and control costs.

In January the alliance released the results of a "community checkup" of nearly 2 million patients taken between 2004 and 2006 to find areas in local health care that needed improving, and found many were below standard.

The report looked at 21 types of care provided to patients in King, Pierce, Snohomish, Kitsap and Thurston counties in the areas of diabetes, heart disease, depression, low back pain, use of generic drugs, use of antibiotics and prevention. Some alliance members called the findings a baseline to begin changing care for the better, while others wondered if more would be done besides gathering and handing out data -- a similar concern voiced about Thursday's announcement.

ON THE WEB

For more information about the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Aligning Forces for Quality visit rwjf.org.

To view the 2008 Dartmouth Atlas of Health Care study, visit dartmouthatlas.org.