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## Health Care

# Putting the consumer in the picture

### Best Practices

Many of life's biggest decisions are about health care, especially if you or a loved one face a life-altering diagnosis.

When it comes to other big decisions like buying a house or car, or even planning a vacation, we tend to make careful, shrewd assessments. We consult experts for information, run the numbers, test the product and compare and analyze the results to make the best possible decision based on our values and price point.

However, most of us are not as disciplined when making decisions about our health care. At a time when we are faced with the pressing and monumental task of reforming our nation's health care system, we need to take a closer look at the true cost of our misconceptions.

A recent poll conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, National Public Radio and the Harvard School of Public Health found that most patients trust their own physician's health care recommendations above those from any other source. On the surface, that makes sense — who knows you better than your own doctor?

Physicians rightfully enjoy the one-on-one doctor-patient relationship; however, when it comes to treating their patients, they don't always follow nationally recognized, evidence-based standards of care. According to the *New England Journal of Medicine*, patients receive evidence-based care only 55 percent of the time. There is no shortage of data showing that a substantial number of physicians continue to rely on ineffective treatments. From over-prescribing antibiotics to authorizing unnecessary knee and back surgeries, many physicians have yet to adopt evidence-based care standards and follow more effective treatment protocols.

What is needed by both physicians and patients is a major shift away from the medical ideology of old toward the evidence-based medicine of tomorrow. Studies show that physicians who practice and follow evidence-based medicine deliver better health outcomes and reduce health care costs. These physicians are able to reduce variations in outcomes, such as complications after surgery or effects of medication, which result in quicker recovery for patients, who in turn make fewer trips to the

physician's office or the hospital. The result is lower health care costs for employers and patients alike, since less is being spent on tests, hospital stays and co-payments.

As for employers, businesses should become more engaged in reviewing their employees' health benefit designs, providing educational materials on how to access physicians who drive more effective results, and creating wellness programs and incentives that encourage employees to take charge of their health and improve their quality of life.

Another example of how patients rely on their physicians is when they seek recommendations for a specialist. Again, this seems intuitive enough — physicians should know other physicians better than we do.

But what a patient ought to be doing is assuming the role of health care consumer and “shopping” for the best specialists in the field, the ones who are recognized for practicing effective and efficient medicine. When consumers “vote with their feet,” they reward excellent physicians by driving business to them and, as a result, elevating the overall quality and efficiency of health care delivery within their community.

Patients, too, need to make the shift by seeking access to medical information through their employers and insurance companies. Many insurers and associations within the community have measurements in place for patients to use. Even though the measurements and criteria may be different, they share the same goal: to identify physicians and hospitals that practice evidence-based medicine and deliver quality, efficient care.

The health care industry and the nation are grappling with these issues, and we must find ways to work together for solutions.

The industry is developing programs that help patients make informed decisions that result in better outcomes without violating the sacred trust between doctor and patient. From online medical records that offer easy access to vital medical history to doctor- and hospital-comparison tools that rate both health care quality and efficiency, these are the types of services that, when combined, will help improve health care quality, keep costs in check and be a critical part of the solution to health care reform.

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