

Report points out ways health care can improve

Keri Brenner, The Olympian, 2/1/08

SEATTLE — Up to one-fifth of patients in the Puget Sound area who need regular cholesterol screenings for diabetes or heart disease are falling through the cracks, a new report says. "Some of us are not getting the care we need," said Dr. David Fleming, chairman of the board of the private, nonprofit [Puget Sound Health Alliance](#), which produced the study.

The [Community Checkup report](#), which was released Thursday, did not include analysis of patient care at any major hospitals, such as Olympia's Providence St. Peter Hospital and Capital Medical Center. It covered care to 1.6 million people seen at 14 large clinics — including the Group Health Cooperative in Olympia — in Thurston, King, Pierce, Snohomish and Kitsap counties. In addition, patient data from 14 health insurance plans and self-insured unions and employers were analyzed.

The report was designed to identify gaps in the region's health care system and to suggest where improvements need to be made, said Steve Hill, administrator for Washington State Health Care Authority. "Tools like this create a common set of quality benchmarks for large health care purchasers like the state of Washington and Boeing," Hill said. "This has a ripple effect as our contracting providers follow these criteria, and then adopt them as a way of doing business."

Patients' names were removed from the study.

Thurston County results

In Thurston County, about 35 percent of the care in the data surveyed was above average, the report says. That meant that people got regular notices when they were supposed to get tests taken, and that they frequently were screened for certain conditions, such as high cholesterol or depression.

"I'm bad at following up," said Group Health patient Joanne Travis of Yelm, who was getting treated Thursday for diabetes at the Olympia clinic. "But whenever I come in here, they run all kinds of tests — check my feet, my kidneys, my blood sugar." Travis, a Group Health patient for 20 years, said the clinic's use of electronic medical records also helps her get alternate physician services if her regular doctor is unavailable. "Where I used to go, at a private practice, if the doctor wasn't there, it was, 'Oh well,'" she said.

The report also gave points to clinics where prescriptions were filled using generic drugs whenever possible, and to those where children were not given unnecessary antibiotics.

In general, higher marks were given for wellness and prevention efforts that focused on the entire patient, not just the symptom or the isolated office visit, said Dr. Matt Handley, associate medical director for quality and informatics at Group Health. "The publication of the Community Checkup gives gentle pressure for providers who are not doing as well to find that out and to make improvements," Handley said.

Gov. Chris Gregoire said the report was "exactly the kind of information that patients and their doctors should have to make informed health care choices and drive a higher- quality, more-affordable health care system."

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[Enlarge Image](#)

Nurse Sandy Rixe uses a monofilament device to check for sensation in diabetic patient Joanne Travis' feet during a routine exam at Group Health Cooperative in Olympia. The Community Checkup report released Thursday analyzed patient care at 14 large clinics in the Puget Sound region, including Group Health. (Steven M. Herppich/The Olympian)

Related Links and Resources:

- [Community Checkup report \(weblink\)](#)

Community Checkup by the numbers

- **Data used:** 1.6 million patient records
- **Clinics involved:** 14, of which Group Health Cooperative in Olympia was the only one in Thurston County
- **Health plans included:** 14, including Group Health, Community Health Plan of Washington, Washington State Health Care Authority Uniform Medical Plan, Premera Blue Cross and Molina Healthcare of Washington
- **Conditions or treatments analyzed:** 21, including diabetes, depression, heart disease, colon cancer, low back pain, generic drugs and antibiotics

Report findings

- **Across the Puget Sound region,** about 20 percent of heart disease or diabetes patients did not have their cholesterol checked at least once during the year assessed.
- **Only about 40 percent** of patients taking a drug to lower cholesterol filled the prescription with a generic drug. Based on an analysis done in 2007 by Puget Sound Health Alliance, an increase of 10 percentage points in the use of generics to lower cholesterol would save more than \$7 million in the region.