

the Business Ledger

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Road to better health care? Think strategically

Our current health care situation at a glance: Costs continue to rise and employers are struggling to provide employees with affordable and useful health insurance options. We are waiting to see if there really is universal health care in our future, and what that will mean.

Medical cost transparency has yet to materialize on a grand scale. And Illinois still does not have hospital report cards although the General Assembly authorized development of a variety of reports back in 2004.

While we are certainly *talking the talk* when it comes to consumer driven health care these days, how many of us actually feel that we are in the driver's seat? The real question would be, is there anything we *can* do right now to produce a positive health care experience?

Yes, I think there is. I believe it begins with thinking strategically – developing a strategic plan for health care. Then, using the tools and resources that are available to shape that plan. For most of us, the starting point will be the health care plan we have through our jobs.

As an employer, you can help employees choose and use their health plans more effectively. Even if there is a single plan offered, there are decisions employees can make, and steps they can take to enhance the quality of health care received.

The basic areas you can encourage employees to think about are:

- 5. Paying for care and insurance** – Would you prefer to pay more in payroll deductions, but have more of the bills paid at the time of service? Would you be willing to pay more for a larger network? And would you be willing to pay more for more freedom in the selection of providers?
- 6. Wellness** – Are you willing to change the unhealthy aspects of your life? Are wellness services important to you?

The next step is education through information. If your employee population is pretty comfortable surfing the Internet, you can provide them with the tools presented here as starting points for independent investigation. If your workforce would benefit from a more hands-on approach, plan an informational meeting.

Let employees know they can look at the quality of hospital care in a variety of areas with these resources:

? "Hospital Compare," from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov), lets the user compare the percentage of patients with certain conditions that were given "best-practice" treatments for the following conditions: heart attack (8 measures), heart failure (4) pneumonia (7), and surgical care improvement / surgical

metrics that cover structure, process, outcome, member survey and efficiency.

? On the Joint Commission Web site (www.jacho.org), you can find a quality report for all hospitals that are accredited by the commission.

? Healthgrades.com is a health care ratings organization that charges for in-depth reports, but provides some free information for consumers. Your employees can go to Healthgrades and find out how hospitals in their network are rated for different procedures and conditions – from heart attack to hip replacement. Hospitals are rated excellent, as expected, or poor.

Perhaps even more fundamental to improving quality of care, and, therefore, quality of life, are resources that will help your employees feel comfortable taking more control of their own health outcomes:

- A 15-page consumer brochure, "Guide to Health Care Quality. How to Know It When You See It," can be downloaded from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality Website (www.ahrq.org). AHRQ is one of the 12 agencies of the Department of Health and Human Services. Other checklists and tips available include five steps to safer health care, 20 tips to help



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- 1. Acute care** – Which hospital(s) you would like to treat you for serious conditions (such as transplants or cancers)?
- 2. Routine hospital care** – Which hospital(s) would you prefer to use for more routine needs (such as minor surgeries or vaginal deliveries)?
- 3. Specialist** – How will you determine which specialists you would use when needed?
- 4. Primary care** – What are you looking for in a primary care physician? Someone who is on call 24/7 (as in an HMO)?

infection prevention (5). One of the metrics is "Percent of Surgery Patients Who Received the Appropriate Preventative Antibiotic(s) for Their Surgery." The report will show the results for a particular time period from all reporting hospitals countrywide, vs. statewide, vs. any specific hospital that you select. The report will also explain why that particular metric is important. In addition to helping you assess your hospital, the tool can also encourage hospitals that are below average to change their protocols to best practices.

? Insurance company hospital comparison tools. Almost all insurers that write medical insurance have some form of hospital comparison tool available to subscribers. For example, BCBS-Illinois' BlueStar Hospital Report looks at 10

prevent medical errors, planning for surgery and talking with your doctor. Much of the information is available in English and Spanish.

- Don't forget about the wellness tools your health insurance provider may offer, free of charge. Most insurers have programs for members that may include rewards for healthy behaviors, custom diet and exercise plans, on-line health risk assessments and nurse hotlines. They also may have materials and onsite education programs you can use to kick start a company wellness initiative.

Last year, Americans spent \$3 trillion on health care. Maybe it's a good idea to start learning more about the care we are buying. It's time to put our mouths where our money is.

