

## **Health Care Reform: Saving money and improving health care quality**

**By Cathy Levine**

COLUMBUS – Despite all the buzz about national health care reform, the public has received little information about what the House and Senate bills will do, not only to expand coverage, but to save money and improve the quality of our health care. These triple goals are achievable and the Senate and House bills both make progress in getting us there.

Provisions in both the House and Senate bills will expand coverage and control skyrocketing health care costs at the same time. Doing one without the other is like squeezing a balloon - squeeze one side and the other side bulges.

Why? Controlling costs without expanding coverage would put an intolerable burden on our hospitals and safety net providers, taking away revenue needed to care for the uninsured. The impact would be devastating to our communities and to Ohioans who would see their premiums rise and access diminish. On the other hand, our state and nation cannot afford to expand coverage without reducing the growth in health care costs. Doing so would cripple our economy and would be unsustainable. The best strategy is to pursue both goals at the same time.

Both the Senate and House bills make progress on expanding coverage *and* controlling costs – so important, because the cost of doing nothing is not an option for families, small businesses or the nation. As important, each cost-control measure and each expansion measure also looks to improve the quality of care people receive. How is it possible to move towards accomplishing all three of these critical goals at the same time?

First, the Senate and House bills are innovative in ways that are vital to preserving and protecting programs like Medicare for the long term, and containing costs and improving efficiencies overall. For example, the Senate bill would allow us to develop quality assessments in order to link payment to better quality care. This means we can start paying for health care based on value and better health outcomes rather than paying based on the number of services or tests performed. This is good news for anyone who has a loved one struggling with illness or health problems.

The millions of people who navigate the health system every day know that they and their loved ones need the right test or treatment at the right time - not an abundance of repeat or unneeded services that don't give them answers or make them better. This isn't primarily about saving money. It's about making health care more efficient and effective for patients. We need to apply the innovation Americans are familiar with in products like the iPhone to health care. Two years ago, the iPhone cost \$600 and did half of what it does now more efficiently and effectively at \$200.

Second, both bills introduce much needed new models of delivering health care as we expand coverage. Because congressional passage of health reform is only the start of the work we need to fix our broken health care system, reform will allow us to test new models over time so we can find out what works the best and continuously build on our success. The national legislation will create incentives and assistance to test, improve, and spread use of these models to everyone.

Many of these new programs are specifically designed to improve care coordination and prevent unnecessary hospital readmissions, especially for people with chronic health conditions. Right here in Ohio, including Columbus, Cleveland and Cincinnati, small initiatives are under way to connect patients with improved primary care teams that help patients coordinate their care (a "medical home") and to build an environment where medical teams and patients - not insurance companies - work together to identify how to improve care for their patients. Coalitions of consumer organizations, including Ohio Consumers for Health Coverage and Ohio Campaign for Better Care, are monitoring and giving input into both national and Ohio efforts to implement new models, in order to make sure that the interests of patients are protected.

There are no silver bullets or easy answers. Realistically, expanding coverage will increase costs in the short term. But over the long term, the health care delivery, quality, and payment reforms contained in the reform bills offer an essential framework for lowering the steady surge of health care costs. The status quo is no longer an option and the cost of doing nothing is too high - for families, workers, health care providers, businesses and for the nation's long-term fiscal health. Balancing the need for change with making sure we do change right is the key to sustainable reform.

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