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Health Reform Column:

Containing health care costs – benefits of health reform in Kansas

The following is a column by Ray Davis, PhD, Professor in the Department of Public Administration at the University of Kansas and Board member of the Kansas Health Policy Authority, regarding how the health reform recommendations delivered to the Kansas legislature will help contain rising health care costs.

While health care costs continue to rise in the United States and in Kansas, employee wages have not kept up with the rising costs. A recent report by the Congressional Budget Office found that if the recent trends in rising health care costs continue, in 75 years, health care expenditures will consume 49% of the United State's gross domestic product. Health care will eat up larger portions of our paychecks and our government budgets.

Is there anything that Kansas can do to contain this growth in health care spending? Yes there is -- the Kansas Health Policy Authority (KHPA) recently delivered health reform recommendations to the Kansas legislature, many of which are aimed at containing health care costs. Here's how --

Built into several of the recommendations include increasing personal responsibility, which encourages cost sharing and improving health behaviors. In addition, increased access to health information technology that reduces fraud and enhances efficiency of health care services and gives consumers the power to compare prices and quality of services highlight a few market-driven methods for controlling costs.

Improving coordination of care, increasing access to medical homes, and implementing disease management in high-risk populations can reduce the need for emergency services and decrease overuse and unnecessary use of health care services. Prevention that focuses on healthier living across all populations can reduce future health care costs. Maximizing federal match funding and providing affordable health insurance to populations currently uninsured – small business and low-income childless adults – will not only improve their access to care, but may also reduce cost shifting to those with insurance and reduce inappropriate use of emergency rooms.

Health reform in Kansas has multiple stakeholders with consumers being central to these initiatives. The 21 health reform recommendations presented by the KHPA have the potential as a package to increase efficiency of Kansas' health care system, decrease over- and inappropriate use of services, and reduce long-term health care costs. Maintaining the status quo will do nothing for reducing future health care expenditures and will leave even more Kansans unable to pay their health care bills or without access to health services.

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The Health Policy Authority is a state agency created to develop and maintain a coordinated and data-driven health policy agenda, and it was tasked this year with reforming health care delivery in Kansas. On November 1, 2007, the Kansas Health Policy Authority Board reported to the Governor and Kansas Legislature health reform options aimed at improving the health and health care system in Kansas.

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