

The Web: Comparing doctors' costs online

Comparing the costs of different doctors -- and procedures -- can be a time-consuming affair. But a new project launched in recent months by the administration of Florida Gov. Jeb Bush is using the Internet to provide a one-stop site where consumers can compare the costs of visits to the doctor's office by ZIP code and find other cost-savings, experts tell UPI's The Web.

The government-sponsored project seems to have inspired at least one other healthcare organization to place cost-comparison information on the Internet in Florida. Other cost-comparison tools are emerging that are national in scope, too, experts say.

Based in Tallahassee, the Agency for Health Care Administration late last fall launched the new consumer Internet site, <http://www.floridacomparecare.gov>. The interactive site is seen by Florida government officials as an initial step in making the healthcare system there more transparent.

The site is emerging as part of an initiative mandated by House Bill 1629, signed by Gov. Bush, to create a consumer-friendly site on the Internet where performance measures of Florida hospitals and outpatient surgery centers can be found. The site is set to provide information on the number of patients at each hospital, the charges for various medical services, the average length of stay for a patient, readmission rates for each hospital, mortality rates and complication rates.

"The more transparent our system is, the more likely we will see even better performance," said AHCA Secretary Alan Levine.

The site is integrated into another site, <http://www.floridahealthstat.com>, that also provides information for patients on particular medical conditions and procedures. Most importantly, the site is providing details as to why the costs and other data differ from hospital to hospital.

The hope is that by making the information publicly available, hospitals will create new benchmarks to improve performance. State officials hope that additional lives will be saved by making such information available.

There are some 32,000 healthcare facilities in Florida and 37 HMOs. The ACHA administers a \$15 billion Medicaid program for the state.

The ACHA's online initiative seems to be inspiring other healthcare providers to make information about their costs and services available online.

Just last week Plantation, Fla.-based CIGNA Dental launched an online Dental Treatment Cost Estimator, which it billed as a "first of its kind" project on the Internet. The site enables CIGNA Dental members to estimate and plan for their dental-care costs before they receive services and is being touted as "the next generation" of online information tools.

"Consumers have a growing need for actionable information to help them make decisions about their healthcare, including their dental care," said Karen Rohan, president of CIGNA Dental. "Having this cost information prior to receiving services can help consumers get the most value from their dental coverage and help them to maintain good oral health."

According to the National Association of Dental Plans, an industry association, there are 159 million Americans covered by some form of dental insurance. Of those patients, 19 percent pay entirely for their own dental benefits and 48 percent share the cost of their dental premium or fees with their employer. With the new online tool, CIGNA Dental members can select the procedure or treatment they are considering and

estimate what their out-of-pocket cost would be -- before making an appointment. Treatment cost estimates are based on their plan information and are adjusted for geographic location.

There are some 117 million Americans who regularly use the Internet to find some kind of healthcare information at established sites like WebMD that provide general information on afflictions, symptoms and cures for an array of maladies.

A national site similar to the one launched by Florida last fall was officially launched two weeks ago.

The site, <http://www.healthia.com>, which is funded by Bessemer Venture Partners and is based in Santa Clara, Calif., targets consumers and small- and medium-sized businesses shopping for healthcare coverage and services, according to Shankar Srinivasan, a member of the founding team.

"Healthia was founded in 2005 to catalyze the consumer-driven healthcare movement. At healthia.com, people can compare health savings accounts, health-insurance plans, carriers and doctors side-by-side and will soon be able to price and compare hospitals and even individual procedures," Srinivasan told the Web.

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