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## Greater transparency needed in health-care business

By *CHRISTOPHER PARKS*

America's health-care system is both impressive and overwhelming. On the one hand, health-care providers have given life, health and hope to millions. Yet, the bureaucracy of multiple providers, ever-increasing costs and an avalanche of paperwork have meant utter confusion to many.

As more of the responsibility for health care is pushed down to individuals through insurance products like high-deductible health plans and health savings accounts, more and better information — and access to it — becomes critical. Patients and families can become smarter consumers, capable of exerting market pressures that improve quality and lower cost, if given the chance.

What is needed is greater transparency. That's why, as a voice of the consumer, we support the sharing of more information such as doctors' fees and quality data.

The idea for "Change:healthcare" was born out of the confusion of paperwork, explanation of benefits and invoices that surrounded the 2005 and 2006 cancer deaths of my parents. When I couldn't make heads or tails of all that paper, I got frustrated and assembled a team to create an online service to help consumers organize and manage their medically related paperwork. That tool has put more information into the hands of consumers, helping them exert greater control over their family's medical care.

But even more important to me has become promoting transparency in the health-care arena. We want to help control costs by engaging consumers in making informed health-care decisions. When people have open access to sound information, they've proven themselves capable of making smart health-care choices, but that means more openness by payers and providers.

At Change:healthcare, we recently completed two studies that illustrate how widely the cost of drugs and medical tests can vary in a region. In one, the price of six prescription drugs varied as much as 20-40 percent between major pharmacy chains. In the second, the cost of a simple strep test varied almost 49 percent from low to high.

Think what this information can mean in the hands of consumers who are being forced to make wiser health-care purchases. We believe that, by enabling like-minded consumers to anonymously compare cost and performance information, they can leverage the insight within their health-care marketplace.

The move to reveal physician cost and quality information would be a good start toward increased transparency. For it to be truly beneficial, all insurers must offer this information, and more.

Americans receive the best health care in the world. And an increased consumer voice and involvement can only make the system better.

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