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## Bringing Comparison Shopping to the Doctor's Office

By CLAIRE CAIN MILLER  
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SAN FRANCISCO — Americans comparison-shop for items as small as groceries and as big as cars. But they rarely compare prices on their health care. When a doctor recommends a test or a procedure, most patients simply go where the doctor tells them to go.



Jim Wilson/The New York Times  
Giovanni Colella, center, co-founder and chief executive of Castlight, with Castlight employees in its San Francisco offices.



Jim Wilson/The New York Times  
Dr. Giovanni Colella, co-founder of Castlight, which helps clients compare costs of procedures.

Even if a patient does want to comparison-shop, there is no easy way to obtain complete and useful information. It is a hole in the market that some companies see as an opportunity, especially because many Americans will soon have to pay more attention to what they are paying for, rather than count on insurance to cover everything.

But there has been no easy way for consumers to shop for the best deal on a [colonoscopy](#) or blood test. A start-up financed by prominent venture capitalists and the [Cleveland Clinic](#), [Castlight Health](#), aims to change that by building a search engine for health care prices. Patients using Castlight could search for doctors that offer a service nearby and find out how much they will charge, depending on their insurance coverage.

A few others are starting to publish health care prices, including [Thomson Reuters](#), a Tennessee start-up called [Change:healthcare](#), the New Hampshire government, which created a [comparison shopping tool](#) for residents, and health insurers. [Aetna](#), for instance, has built [tools to help patients estimate prices](#) and may build more advanced tools, said Lonny Reisman, Aetna's chief medical officer.

For instance, Safeway pays up to \$1,200 for its employees' colonoscopies, a preventative procedure to detect [cancer](#). If employees wish to go to a doctor who charges more, they must pay the difference. According to Castlight, colonoscopies in the Bay Area, where Safeway is based, range from \$500 to \$3,000, and sometimes a doctor charges different rates at different hospitals.

Castlight plans to add quality measurements to its price information. There are already several providers of that information, though there is no standard set of quality measurements in medicine. But even with quality ratings, there are many procedures for which Castlight's service is not applicable. Someone suffering a [heart attack](#) is not going to check the Web before calling the ambulance, and a patient who discovers he needs emergency [brain surgery](#) is likely to prioritize quality above all else.

Even for more basic services, pricing is not always cut-and-dried. The delivery of a baby, for example, includes the hospital stay and the obstetrician's fees, but could also include fees for a pediatrician, an anesthesiologist and specialists if there are complications.

At this stage, Castlight works best for big companies that are self-insured and for outpatient doctor visits for which quality does not vary greatly.

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