
Controlling cost in health care

As individual drivers, we don't control the cost of gas. But that doesn't mean that we can't change our driving habits, the fuel efficiency of our cars, our use of public transportation, or get involved in energy policy debates. Many of us have done at least one of these things and, in doing so, been able to influence the impact on our pocketbooks and daily lives to some degree.

Health care costs don't have a sticker price that's as visible as gas prices, but they've been escalating at an alarming rate, too. Like the price of gas, many of the main cost drivers that affect us — labor and technology costs, federal Medicare reimbursement rates, and the high local cost of living — are not in our control. Despite this, there are ways that we in Santa Cruz County can do our part to control spiraling health care costs.

As representatives of Santa Cruz County's three hospitals and members of the Health Improvement Partnership (HIP) of Santa Cruz County, we are motivated by the idea that our local health care system can't wait for state and federal change. We believe that we have to do whatever we can, right here and right now. (HIP is a countywide collaborative of health, foundation, government and community leaders working together to knit the many different health care players into a more cohesive, integrated and efficient system.) What are we doing already, and what can we do more of, to help keep health care costs under control?

First, we can do our best to prevent chronic diseases and coordinate care for them once they appear. Chronic diseases —

especially the dual epidemics of obesity and diabetes — are significant contributors to health care costs (not to mention unnecessary pain, suffering, and shortened life spans). Our hospitals and clinics provide a variety of classes, information and other support to help people change their diet and exercise routines and avert these and other chronic diseases. HIP is a strong advocate of initiatives that prevent obesity in children, a population at risk for much earlier onset of chronic diseases. Initiatives like the 52-10 campaign help address this important risk factor by helping physicians, parents, and others present a consistent message to kids: eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables a day, limit TV and computer screen time to two hours, play vigorously for at least one hour, and consume zero sugar-sweetened drinks.

As strange as this may sound coming from hospital executives, another goal is to help patients stay out of the hospital. While our hospitals provide excellent care for those who need it, some of that care is inappropriate (and costly) because it occurs in the emergency room instead of a primary care physician's office — or occurs late in a disease process, when it could have been addressed earlier. Santa Cruz County's health care providers offer excellent "medical homes" and coordinated care designed to keep patients healthy and out of the hospital. Healthy Kids, which subsidizes health insurance coverage for children in low-income families, has enrolled more than 9,500 local children in either Healthy Kids or other programs for which they are eligible and helped keep them

healthier — reducing costs along the way.

One of the many hardships associated with the end of life is a lack of planning and communication about what type of care and level of intervention one would want. When a person nearing the end of life cannot communicate these wishes, the situation often defaults to expensive and intrusive interventions that do little to prolong life or its quality. The Make Your Wishes Known campaign helps to avoid this scenario by promoting clear communication long before it's needed.

We can continue to invest in health information technology so that our own operations are more efficient and we can communicate across settings to coordinate patients' care. Finally, many of us have been active in trying to change Santa Cruz County's designation as a rural county, which artificially lowers federal reimbursement rates to physicians. This has direct as well as indirect effects on local health care costs, including the access to care that local residents enjoy and our ability to recruit and retain talented people. We haven't won that fight yet, but haven't given up. These are just a few examples of ways that HIP's members and our colleagues are trying to influence the trajectory of health care costs in our county. Even though there are powerful trends that seem difficult to counter, we believe we have made some progress already and will continue to do so — helping not only our own county, but others facing the same pressure from escalating health care costs.

For more information on these programs, please visit Healthy Kids at <http://www.schealthykids.org>; Make Your Wishes Known at <http://www.makeyourwishesknown.org>; and 52-10 Campaign at <http://www.unitedwaysc.org/GFH.shtml>.

Jae Dale is the administrator at Watsonville Community Hospital. Lawrence deGhetaldi is president of the Palo Alto Medical Foundation/ Santa Cruz Region. Nanette Mickiewicz is president of Dominican Hospital.