

Eleanor Littman: Working together for a healthy community

Our local health care system, like that of almost every other place in the country, is struggling with a dilemma. How do we provide health care that is better coordinated [from both the health care provider's and the patient's perspectives], without driving costs through the roof, while still creating a healthy community for all?

Last month, the Health Improvement Partnership of Santa Cruz County brought together representatives from many different organizations to tackle the overall question of what we can all do, acting in concert, to make health care better in Santa Cruz County.

HIP is a local, countywide collaborative of health, foundation, government and community leaders. Our members, who represent all of the county's major health organizations, meet throughout the year to find ways to improve Santa Cruz County's health system as a whole -- even though we each may be responsible for specific organizations or different pieces of the system.

The backdrop for this particular discussion was the set of changes that are already taking effect as part of the health care reform legislation passed earlier this year -- the Affordable Care Act. Participants identified a familiar roster of challenges, from our currently fragmented system, to the lack of primary care providers [sometimes driving patients into emergency departments for care that could be offered more effectively and at lower cost elsewhere], to incentive systems that favor tests and procedures over the kind of education and counseling that might keep people healthier in the first place.

These problems are complex and extend far beyond our county, but we have a lot of talent and creativity in our community that can drive local innovation and progress. For example, we can develop and implement specific changes that will improve the coordination of care for both patients and providers -- changes such as improving health information technology, creating better patient self-management education programs to help people with chronic conditions such as diabetes, and helping people connect to a "medical home" for ongoing health care.

We can "bend" the steeply escalating curve of health care costs by studying and learning from other communities [such as Grand Junction, Colo.] that have succeeded in lowering health care costs without compromising quality or access, by engaging different players [such as employers, unions and health plans] in discussions about health care costs and quality, and supporting promising studies and practices such as pilots that allow terminally ill patients to choose palliative hospice care without giving up their treatment options.

We can make our entire community healthier overall by focusing on the health and well-being of our oldest and youngest residents, recruiting more primary care providers and advance practice nurses to the area, setting up nurse-run clinics, and expanding school-based health centers.

In 2011, HIP members will use this space to expand on these and other ideas related to health care reform -- both the opportunities it represents, as well as its challenges. Through these monthly conversations, we hope you will have a chance to learn about and explore the local ideas already percolating to deal with state and national health system changes, and get to know more about the thinking of your local health care leaders along the way.

From all of us at HIP, best wishes for a healthy 2011!

Eleanor Littman is executive director of the Health Improvement Partnership of Santa Cruz County.