

post-gazette.com Pittsburgh Post-Gazette OPINION / PERSPECTIVES

In Rebuttal: Highmark's goals

The right care delivers more value

Monday, November 29, 2010

By Dr. Donald R. Fischer

Dr. William Follansbee's opinion piece in the Nov. 21 Forum section ("[Insurers Shouldn't Practice Medicine](#)") presents a distorted and entirely inaccurate picture of Highmark's efforts to work collaboratively with health care providers to address growing patient safety concerns about radiation exposure from cardiac imaging procedures.

Highmark strives to make sure that our members receive the right care, at the right time, in the most appropriate health care setting. If we can achieve this goal, we can meet our members' expectations and needs to bring them more value for their health care dollar -- as we know that higher quality care drives cost efficiency.

We work every day with our members and the physicians and hospitals in our networks to achieve documented improvements in quality and patient safety, while also addressing the real public frustration with unsustainable medical cost increases.

Through a collaborative effort, including coaching and guidance combined with financial incentives, our community has addressed some of the most critical issues in health care today -- with tangible results.

For example, we have worked with more than 60 hospitals to help reduce the incidence of hospital-acquired infections -- improving the quality of care patients receive during a stay in the hospital and saving millions of dollars. The Harvard Medical School Department of Health Care Policy has recognized our QualityBLUE program for its effectiveness, innovation and potential for replication in other communities.

We are now bringing this collaborative mindset toward improving the quality and appropriateness of cardiac diagnostic imaging services. There is increasing public awareness and scrutiny of the risks of overexposure to medical radiation. Despite Dr. Follansbee's attempt to downplay the issue, the radiation dose from a commonly used cardiac imaging test, myocardial perfusion imaging, is eight times greater than a CT scan of the brain. Highmark members are undergoing more cardiac imaging tests, especially MPI studies, compared with members of other health plans, increasing the risk of radiation exposure.

Research studies published by the American College of Cardiology have found that nearly 30 percent of MPI studies do not meet the ACC's objective criteria for appropriateness. In addition, there are alternatives to MPI studies that can provide similar information with less risk. Stress echocardiography in the hands of a skilled physician can be a more cost-effective and safe means of imaging for some patients. We believe that those patients should be informed of their testing choices, potential risks and benefits for each study.

To help ensure the delivery of high-quality cardiac imaging services, Highmark is using these cardiac-specific guidelines for its program.

Many Americans today are still unsure if health care reform will help improve the quality of medical care. We can be successful in improving quality and moderating cost increases if health insurers, doctors, hospitals, employers and consumers work together as team members with a common purpose.

Highmark has an obligation to our members and employer group customers to work cooperatively with health care providers to help assure the delivery of safer, more effective care and by focusing on services which are at high risk for inappropriate use.

Dr. Donald R. Fischer is senior vice president and chief medical officer of Highmark Inc. (www.highmark.com).

First published on November 26, 2010 at 12:00 am