

MARK ROGERS: Health care plan needs patient accountability

The Patriot Ledger

Posted Jun 24, 2009 @ 05:00 AM

BRAINTREE — President Barack Obama's proposed health care reform plan represents a sweeping transformation of the U.S. health care industry. While early debate has focused on the plan's proposal for a government-funded health care insurance program to provide coverage to as many as 46 million uninsured men, women and children (which could cost taxpayers \$1 trillion over the next decade), less attention has been directed towards the plan's proposals to promote prevention and strengthen public health.

Any effort to overhaul our nation's health care system with the intention of reducing health care costs needs to include specific mandates for patient accountability with respect to their own care and treatment.

Patient non-compliance is a significant contributing factor to out-of-control health care costs in this country. Consider, for example, that about 50 percent of the two billion prescriptions filled each year are not taken correctly – and many prescriptions are never filled (which, in fairness, is oftentimes the result of the high costs of prescription medication).

Many appointments for diagnostic tests and follow-up visits with primary care physicians are cancelled by patients and never rescheduled. It has been estimated that 10 percent of hospital admissions are due to patient non-compliance.

A recent study in the New England Journal of Medicine estimated the annual cost of hospital readmissions resulting from inadequate coordination of care and treatment at \$17.4 billion. Compare this with the cost of patient non-compliance on the U.S. economy, which is estimated at almost \$200 billion per year.

The statistics associated with chronic diseases (such as cancer, heart disease and diabetes) are even more disturbing. Chronic diseases account for 70 percent of all deaths in the United States each year. In Massachusetts alone the economic impact associated with these chronic diseases is over \$30 billion each year. This number could be dramatically reduced through early detection, treatment and a healthy lifestyle.

President Obama says he believes comprehensive health reform should include investment in prevention and wellness. The extent of that "investment" remains to be seen. Nevertheless, if the president hopes to gain substantial support for his plan from the medical community, a significant investment in prevention and wellness needs to be a key component.

Although the details of the plan have yet to emerge, the initial response by health care providers has been tepid at best. At his recent speech outlining the plan before the American Medical Association, President Obama was poorly received by a portion of the audience when he announced he did not advocate for a cap on medical malpractice lawsuits. Such a response is not surprising considering the impact of rising medical malpractice insurance premiums on health care providers.

Another factor which will not serve to rally the medical community to the plan, is President Obama's intent to fund the plan (at least in part), from cuts in federal payments to hospitals by \$200 billion and in cuts of approximately \$300 billion from Medicare and Medicaid over the next 10 years.

Patients need to be educated that not only does their failure to be a proactive health care recipient compromise their own care and treatment, but it also results in higher out-of-pocket costs.

While the benefit of improved health care should be incentive enough to change patient behavior, often it takes an associated fiscal benefit to elicit the necessary motivation.

There is a clear consensus in the United States that change is needed in our current health care system to control costs and decrease the number of uninsured and underinsured individuals.

As Congress begins its debate of the plan, there needs to be a focus on including provisions which will encourage patients to accept responsibility for their role in their own care and treatment.

Mark Rogers is an attorney with The Rogers Law Firm in Braintree and specializes in health care law.