

Health care quality increases — but so does cost

WASHINGTON - The quality of health care in the United States is steadily improving, with more patients getting recommended treatments, but there are a few notable gaps — and costs are skyrocketing, according to a report released on Tuesday.

Treatment for conditions such as heart attack are exemplary, the National Committee for Quality Assurance found.

But fewer than 20 percent of patients with heart disease have their cholesterol down to recommended levels, the group found in its annual report card on health care quality.

"Since 2000, improvement in just four areas of care — beta-blocker treatment for heart attack patients, cholesterol management, controlling high blood pressure and improving blood sugar control among diabetics — has saved the lives of almost 125,000 Americans," the independent, nonprofit group said in its report.

The committee rated 767 different health plans, including Medicare, private insurers and health maintenance organizations, on a variety of measures from heart disease care to immunization.

The best-performing plans did an excellent job, said NCQA President Margaret O'Kane. "When a plan is reminding physicians to do things, they will do it across the board," O'Kane told a news conference.

For instance, experts agree that anyone who has had a heart attack should get a beta-blocker drug.

"When NCQA began measuring this life-saving treatment in 1996, fewer than 2 in 3 patients were receiving the right care," the report reads.

"But in 2006, more than 97 percent of heart attack patients received beta-blockers and nearly every plan that reported on its performance had beta-blocker treatment rates of 90 percent or higher. This single improvement has saved between 4,400 and 5,600 lives over the last six years, and improved the health of tens of thousands of people."

The group also found that close to 80 percent of children in commercial health plans received all recommended vaccines and 73.4 percent of children in Medicaid plans were fully immunized.

But only 1 in 4 children had a recommended follow-up visit with a primary care doctor after being prescribed an attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder drug, even though such follow up is considered key.

The report said that if the entire health care system were to perform as well as the top 10 percent of plans surveyed, every year between 35,000 and 75,000 deaths, 45 million sick days and \$7.4 billion in lost productivity could be prevented.

Peter Orszag, Director of the U.S. Congressional Budget Office, said costs are skyrocketing.

"If we stay on the same path, the (U.S. federal) budget will become dominated by Medicare and Medicaid," he told the news conference.

He looks at the report's findings on which regions of the country had higher health care spending. "The higher-spending regions do not generate better outcomes than lower-spending regions," Orszag said.

Health insurers, both private and public, need to study which health care treatments work, which do not, and stick to the most cost-effective approaches, the report said.