Empowering Consumers with Better Health Care

Why be an empowered health care consumer?

The cost of employee health care premiums has increased more than four times faster than the average worker's earnings since the year 2001.(1) Unfortunately, these higher costs don’t always guarantee quality care.

Is there anything you can do? Is there a way to receive better care and lower your costs?

By becoming an empowered health care consumer, you will be informed and more involved in health care decisions. You will learn about health and medical practices and take an active role in treatment decisions, often resulting in better care at lower costs. This series of newsletters is being produced to help you achieve this goal: Better Care, Lower Cost.

More Involvement + More Information = Better Care

Medical practices

The reasons to become an empowered health care consumer are compelling. In our health care system today, the frequency of medical mistakes and excess treatments is alarmingly high. These mistakes and overtreatments are dangerous for your health and draining on your pocketbook.

Here is what the experts tell us:

■ Patient safety incidents cost the Medicare program $8.8 billion in three years.(2)

■ During 2004 to 2006, nearly 250,000 deaths among hospitalized patients were potentially preventable, and Medicare patients who had one or more patient-safety incidents had a one-in-five chance of dying.(3)

■ Medication errors harm at least 1.5 million people every year, and on average, at least one medication error occurs per hospital patient per day.(4)

■ Fewer than 50 percent of individuals using emergency rooms need that level of expensive treatment.(5)

■ One in every 10 patients who died within 90 days of surgery did so because of a preventable error.(6)

To avoid these problems, consumers must replace blind trust in medical professionals with intelligent decision-making and collaboration. Being informed and involved in medical decisions can not only help you reduce the chances of medical error, but may also save you money by avoiding waste relating to unnecessary care. It takes time and effort to become an empowered health care consumer, but the rewards are worth it!

So how can you minimize the chance of having a medical mishap affect you? The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations is the nation’s predominant standards-setting and accrediting body in health care. Over the past several years, the Joint Commission has launched a new patient safety campaign. The goal of this campaign is to encourage patients to become informed and active members of the health care team. Part of this new education campaign includes publications like, Speak Up: Help Prevent Errors in Your Care.(7)

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Five steps to safer health care:

1. Ask questions if you have doubts or concerns. Ask questions and make sure you understand the answers. Choose a doctor you feel comfortable talking to.

2. Keep and bring a list of ALL the medicines you take. Give your doctor and pharmacist a list of all the medicines that you take, including nonprescription medicines. Tell them about any drug allergies you have. Ask about side effects and what to avoid while taking the medicine.

3. Get the results of any test or procedure. Ask when and how you will get the results of tests or procedures. Don’t assume the results are fine if you do not get them when expected, be it in person, by phone or by mail. Call your doctor and ask for your results. Ask what the results mean for your care.

4. Talk to your doctor about which hospital is best for your health needs. Ask your doctor about which hospital has the best care and results for your condition if you have more than one hospital to choose from. Be sure you understand the instructions you get about follow-up care when you leave the hospital.

5. Make sure you understand what will happen if you need surgery. Make sure you, your doctor and your surgeon all agree on exactly what will be done during the operation. Ask your doctor, “Who will manage my care when I am in the hospital?” Ask your surgeon:
   - Exactly what will you be doing?
   - About how long will it take?
   - What will happen after the surgery?
   - How can I expect to feel during recovery?

Tell the surgeon, anesthesiologist and nurses about any allergies, bad reaction to anesthesia and any medications you are taking.

Sources: