

Awakening the Sleeping Giant: How Engaging and Educating Health Care Consumers Can Reduce Cost in the Era of Health Care Reform, and How Convenient Care Clinics Can Help

Executive Summary
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Now that new health care reform legislation has become law, the United States health care system can expect another 32 million people over the next several years to join the approximately 260 million Americans who currently have access to health care services.¹ This phenomenon could produce significant new health care costs unless health care leaders can determine how to deliver quality care while easing the burden on primary care physicians, and simultaneously reducing overall cost. None of these goals can be achieved, however, without the active participation of health care consumers. The time has come to awaken this “sleeping giant” in order to enable a healthy future.

The best case future scenario is a culture of health where consumers are actively engaged in their own health care and that of their families, making sensible, well-informed care choices that will lead to better health and significant cost reductions. A key challenge is to activate and educate the consumer about the economic and personal benefits of self-management.

If this challenge can be met, the U.S. health care system stands to save billions of dollars as knowledgeable consumers opt for the most cost-effective sources of care. Today this is too often not the case. For example, a recent study found that there were more than 119 million emergency room visits in a single year in the U.S., and estimates suggest that as many as 20 to 30 percent were unnecessary and could have been handled in other medical settings.

Of the total U.S. health care expenditures of \$2.3 trillion, 21 percent or \$483 billion is spent on physician/clinical care, according Kaiser Family Health Foundation and government figures.² Using the United Kingdom estimates as a model, if approximately 20 percent or more of those visits are unnecessary and we reduce these costs by 20 percent, it would result in a savings of \$96.6 billion annually or \$966 billion over 10 years.

Comparing costs of various medical settings and self-care, the average costs for treatment of common ailments in an emergency room are \$570, while a doctor’s office and urgent care average around \$160. Retail clinics range from \$70 to \$110.³

The National Association of Community Health Centers estimates that about \$18 billion is wasted each year on unnecessary hospital visits that could have been provided by a health clinic. If these health

clinics were to reach their access goal of 30 million patients by 2015, the increased savings would amount to approximately \$40 billion annually, the Association said.⁴

Unfortunately, there are a number of factors that are standing in the way of this vision for a better health future:

- Some Americans take a passive approach to their health care, relying on doctors, other health care professionals and insurers to determine their care.
- Ill-informed consumers over utilize certain types of care and drive up costs. The U.K. experience is eye-opening: unnecessary medical visits for minor ailments account for about 20 percent or more of all doctors’ appointments and trips to the ER.⁵
- The coming shortage of primary care doctors and nurses will further challenge the efficient delivery of health care services.
- The medical establishment is disinclined to embrace newer models of care, such as convenient care clinics, that could help ease the burden.

A systemic change must take place: health care leaders must work together to provide a continuum of care that offers the appropriate combination of treatment, cost and information to each health care consumer. Convenient care clinicians have a pivotal role to play in this scenario to catalyze health care consumerism. At the same time, they can relieve an over-taxed primary health care system.

The convenient care clinician is appropriately positioned to awaken the consumer to opportunities for education and cost-savings. The clinic setting allows the health care provider to meet face-to-face with patients for a longer one-on-one period with a shortened waiting time. Convenient care clinicians can empower and educate consumers to make choices to address minor ailments and manage chronic conditions that save time and money.

We champion a movement that activates and educates consumers via the convenient care clinics, as well as other points of care. The Foundation for HealthSMART Consumers™ supports a series of actions that will transform the consumer from a complacent recipient of information to an active participant in the health system who accepts

education and uses it to stay healthy and to lower costs:

- First, give nurse practitioners and other non-physician professionals the tools needed to properly activate and educate the “sleeping giant” group of health care consumers.
- Second, utilize technology to appropriately disseminate educational programs, such as SMARTcare™, to consumers in convenient care and other primary care settings.
- Third, encourage the U.S. government and research institutions to investigate other avenues of support for consumer activation and development of educational programs that move consumers from a passive to a health-promoting, active role in the nation’s health future.

The paper explores the combined effects of awakening the “sleeping giant” health care consumer and expanding the role of convenient care clinicians in promoting health, educating about self-management, and, in turn, making a substantial contribution to reducing health care expenditures.

References

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3. Mehrotra, A. et al. Comparing Costs and Quality of care at Retail Clinics with that of Other Medical Settings for 3 Common Ailments.
4. National Association of Community Health Centers. Better Care for Lower Costs: The Best of Both Worlds, 2010. Accessed at: <http://www.nachc.org/invest-in-chcs.cfm>
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About The Foundation

The Foundation for HealthSMART Consumers, founded in 2008, is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to enabling health care consumers to make sensible, well-informed care choices. The organization believes consumers need to be better educated about the decisions they make to manage their own personal and family health so they can achieve wellness and avoid unnecessary health care costs.

The Foundation also conducts research and develops tools to educate consumers and Foundation partners on trends and health issues that affect self-management of health. For more information about The Foundation and its programs, go to:

www.healthsmartconsumers.org

About SMARTcare

The SMARTcare platform enables wellness education, health promotion and condition management information for patients, and supports the mission of empowering patients to make informed choices about their health care. SMARTcare, Inc. partners with The Foundation for HealthSMART Consumers™ and works in conjunction with other leading health care associations to secure quality content used in SMARTcare programs. The core programs offer point-of-care, point-of-coverage and point-of-benefit solutions, and include SMARTcare™ Professional, SMARTcare™ Living, SMARTcare™ Savings, SMARTcare™ Connects and SMARTcare™ Benefits.

For more information about SMARTcare programs designed to activate health care consumers, contact SMARTcare, Inc. at 1-800-918-4011 or visit:

www.smartcaredia.com

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