

Experts debate means to cut health costs

By Tom Panzenhagen
Staff writer

Experts agree that spiraling health care costs must be contained, but they differ on the means to that end.

And they concede that reducing costs will be difficult.

Symond R.V. Gottlieb, executive director of the Greater Detroit Area Health Council, said of price controls: "I can see all the horrors of bureaucratic involvement in that kind of effort, but some kind of price controls may be desirable."

Gottlieb, along with panelists Marianne Udow, director of policy and development in health care affairs for Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Michigan; Bud Volberding, director of Oakland County's department of Institutional and Human Services; and Harvey Day, chief of the Bureau of Health Facilities for the Michigan Department of Health, appeared on a health care cost containment program Monday.

The program at the Birmingham Unitarian Church was sponsored by the

League of Women Voters of Birmingham/Bloomfield.

Gottlieb said he believed price fixing for medical services will be uniform by 1985, but added: "Health care cost is not an economic issue — it's an ethical issue, a question of how the nation's resources are going to be allocated compared to everything else we need and want."

UDOW SAID Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs) provide an incentive to control costs because physicians taking part in such plans are paid by "capitation reimbursement" or according to how many clients subscribe to the HMO program rather than according to specific services provided.

Because physicians are paid on a per capita basis, it encourages them to keep the cost of health care services low, she said.

By contrast, Preferred Provider Organizations (PPOs) reimburse "providers" (physicians and hospitals) based on services rendered, although, she added, "Some incentives are built in to keep services at a minimum."

Volberding stressed "wellness" as a means of reducing health care costs. Wellness is the name given to preventive measures designed to limit the need for health care.

"Consumers adapting healthful living practices is an area we can improve upon," Volberding said. "We should encourage it even in a financial sense, if possible."

He said he couldn't provide specific dollar savings that would result from such a program, but he said wellness is stressed "on a grand scale in California and the West," and that he would work with county commissioners to institute such a program in Oakland County.

DAY, THE Michigan Department of Health official, said, "Society has changed its value structure. We now say we no longer can afford everything."

He said new medical services and the purchase of major medical equipment would have to be controlled along with fees for existing services charged by physicians and hospitals.

As an example, he cited a breakthrough in technology that allows for relief from kidney stones thanks to a new machine that dissolves the stones.

"We used to pass kidney stones," Day said. Now most hospitals want a machine to dissolve them, and that could cost "10 million a throw."

He didn't rule out the purchase of new technology, but said, "Those hospitals that get new equipment will have to give back to the state by serving as a data base to determine (the equipment's) usefulness."

WHAT CAN the consumer do to reduce health care costs?

Gottlieb said, "The consumer can learn what questions to ask, and develop a sense of confidence in asking them."

"We're usually scared to ask doctors questions . . . and we don't stop to ask if there is an alternative (medical procedure)."

Udow lamented a breakdown in doctor-patient communication.

And Day, backing communication

between doctor and patient, cited the example of his wife's recent hospitalization.

"Our doctor put in writing what we could expect (from a surgical procedure) and what our choices were," he said. As a result, Day's wife spent two fewer days in the hospital than she might have were questions not asked.

PRESCRIPTION drug costs and people not covered by medical programs were other topics of debate.

Udow said prescription drug costs are "the third largest payout" in health care costs. She said such costs could be controlled "through a PPO-type program," wherein clients formed a buying cooperative so that pharmacists could purchase drugs from suppliers in

large quantities at reduced prices.

In response to a question about working people not covered by a medical plan, Day noted, "Two ends of the continuum are being served, but there's a growing middle not being served."

Gottlieb said, "They are going to be in trouble — they already are in trouble." He referred to people covered neither by employer health plans or Medicare or Medicaid.

"These are pretty good folks; they're not looking for a handout," Gottlieb said. "But increasingly we're turning these folks away."

"That's the Achilles' heel of the health care system. Government — whose role it is to finance health care — is begging off because it's politically prudent to do so."

recreation news

Each week the Farmington Hills Parks and Recreation Department will present a synopsis of upcoming activities in this column. For further information regarding programs, contact our Office at 474-6115. On city council agenda matters, call our Newsline at 476-3838.

CROSS COUNTRY SKI LESSONS - The Parks and Recreation Division will be offering cross country ski lessons at the Glen Oaks Ski Center. Lessons will be available on weekends for beginner and intermediate skiers at 10 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. All lessons are 1½ hours long. The fee for the lessons will be \$11 including ski rental, \$6 with your own equipment. Ski lessons are pre-registration only at the Parks and Recreation Office.

MOONLIGHT SKI TOUR - Enjoy skiing beautiful Glen Oaks Golf Course

by moonlight on Feb. 8 from 7 - 10 p.m. No fee will be charged for this special event. Ski rental and a snack bar will be available. No pre-registration necessary. Ski rental is \$6.

SNOW SCULPTURE CONTEST - The Parks and Recreation Division is sponsoring a snow sculpture contest for individuals, churches, clubs or schools to show their creative talents on Feb. 16. Awards will be given to the largest, most elaborate and most colorful creation. The judging will be done after 3 p.m. on Feb. 16 at the locations that are chosen by each entry within the Farmington area or school district. Entry fee is \$5.

SENIOR ADULT TAX ASSISTANCE - Senior adults can receive assistance with preparation of 1984 federal, state, homestead and energy audit forms. Please be prepared when you come.

Bring your 1984 "W" form and 1989 forms; the amount of interest, dividends and Social Security received in 1984 and the amount of real estate taxes or rent paid in 1984 and to whom. A copy of your 1983 tax return is helpful. All assistance remains confidential and free. The program will be held at the Senior Adult Center on the following Tuesdays: Feb. 19 and 26; March 5, 12, 19 and 26; April 2 and 9.

ADULT SOFTBALL - The Parks and Recreation Division will hold its initial manager's meeting on March 12 at the Farmington Hills Library, 32737 W. 12 Mile Road. Women's league meeting will be at 6:30 p.m. with the men's

league at 7:30 p.m. Discussion will include league information, entry fee, registration dates and other pertinent information.

YOUTH BOWLING - The Parks and Recreation Division, in cooperation with Bel-Aire, Country and Northwest Lanes, will offer a comprehensive program for grades 3-5 that will teach individuals correct lane approach, ball delivery, timing and scoring. Classes will begin the week of March 4. The fee is \$15 and registration will be accepted at the Parks and Recreation Office or by mail from informational flyers that will be dispersed in schools.

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