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Health care system examined

LACK OF INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS DECRIED

By Jim Warren

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Patients must become smarter consumers to cope in today's high-priced health care market, but systems that could help them do that are few and far between, speakers at a health conference in Lexington agreed yesterday.

With limited sources of information, patients all too often have no way of gauging how much a medical procedure might cost, the cost or types of drugs that might be involved, or which hospitals and doctors might provide the best outcome at the best price, conferees said.

David Adkisson, president and CEO of the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, noted that when people are able to compare and shop for the best deals on most consumer items, costs go down and service improves.

"Why should things be different in health care?" Adkisson wondered.

The comments came during a daylong Conference for Healthcare Transparency & Patient Advocacy at the Four Points Sheraton organized by Health Watch USA, a Somerset-based grass-roots organization. Transparency refers to efforts to make information about health care quality and services more available to the public.

But a series of speakers presented a generally glum picture of America's health care system, arguing that it provides too little information, costs too much, serves too few and produces results that look shabby compared with the systems in many other industrialized countries.

They noted that the United States lags behind in many public health measures, such as infant and maternal mortality. Meanwhile, they said, the skyrocketing cost of health insurance is strapping families and forcing some employers to reduce coverage or to demand that workers contribute more to help pay the expense.

"We're in trouble and something must be done," said Marvin Feit, editor of the Journal of Health and Social Policy. "We can't continue in the way we are going."

Keynote speaker Joycelyn Elders, who was U.S. surgeon general in the Clinton administration, blamed the American medical establishment for not doing enough to solve patients' problems.

Elders noted that every criminal suspect now has a right to an attorney because generations of lawyers have aggressively campaigned for defendants' rights. In contrast, Elders said, the medical establishment has done far too little to campaign for patients' rights.

"We as doctors have not done our jobs," Elders declared. "We have to be the voice and the vision for the poor and the powerless."

Dr. Kevin Kavanagh, a Somerset physician who planned the conference, presented a list of the limited sources of health care information that are available to the public online.

"Transparency is the key, regardless of what kind of health care system we have," Kavanagh said.

Kavanagh cited four measures the public should know in assessing a health care institution's services: nurse-staffing levels; infection rates; rates of skin sores and bed sores among patients; and mortality rates.

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