

OPINION

Wednesday, June 10, 2009

Lebanon Daily News

Don't split medical, pharmacy care

By SHERRY KNOWLTON

Each new report about our struggling economy underscores the need to ensure consumers have access to quality, affordable health care. As our state leaders work in the next few weeks to craft a new budget, it is essential that they protect the health-care safety net that so many Pennsylvanians rely on each and every day.

Medicaid is a taxpayer-funded, public health-insurance program that finances essential health care and long-term care for those in need. In Pennsylvania, 2 million residents are served by Medicaid. In Lebanon County, 17,249 residents rely on Medicaid. Among them are 8,728 children, 1,760 seniors and 2,312 disabled individuals. These individuals truly have nowhere else to turn.

AmeriHealth Mercy Health Plan is part of a state network of managed-care organizations that deliver health care to more than 60 percent of those on Medicaid, including 11,316 in Lebanon County. Each of the MCOs has been ranked among the best in the nation, saving the state a com-

GUEST OPINION

bined \$2.7 billion during a recent five-year period.

The results are real and measurable. Because of "pay for performance" guidelines, each MCO must meet certain service thresholds to receive state reimbursements. We need to ensure our consumers get regular checkups or exams and follow through on treatments to get healthy and stay healthy.

To accomplish this goal, our case managers work directly with Medicaid patients to promote regular and lower-cost preventive care, coordinate care for those with chronic conditions and increase access to quality care for special-needs individuals. All of this helps Medicaid patients avoid unnecessary and costly hospital stays.

Key to our success is the coordination of medical care with pharmacy services. But that could soon change if a plan in the governor's proposed budget is enacted. The state wants to transfer pharmacy services from health-care organiza-

tions to the Department of Public Welfare.

Similar plans have been defeated by the Legislature three straight years, with bipartisan support — and for good reason. The switch makes a complex health-care system even more difficult for those in need, and it jeopardizes the quality of care that many with chronic conditions receive.

Medicaid patients' special needs mandate a comprehensive and seamless delivery system that integrates pharmacy services. Separating drug coverage from health-care services disrupts the ability of MCOs to use medicines as a way to manage disease and reduce overall health-care costs.

In the end, the governor's pharmacy plan could hurt both patients and Pennsylvania taxpayers.

Knowlton is senior vice president and general manager of AmeriHealth Mercy Health Plan. The company serves more than 100,000 Medical Assistance recipients in 15 counties, including Lebanon.