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NOTEWORTHY

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Americans Take More Care Buying a Refrigerator than Picking a Doctor

CHICAGO, IL — Americans spend twice as much time researching car and computer purchases than they do in selecting a doctor, and six in 10 say they probably wouldn't change their ways even if price and quality information on health care providers was readily available. These are among the findings of a nationwide survey of 1,000 adults commissioned by Destiny Health and conducted by Opinion Research Corporation.

Barry Swartzberg, executive director of Destiny Health's sister company Discovery Health, said that as an estimated 97% of insured Americans and survey respondents are covered by traditional forms of health insurance, the results show how paternalistic forms of coverage have had the effect of keeping Americans disengaged from the health care process. This, he said, is because Americans with traditional health insurance see little or nothing to gain from seeking the lower prices or higher quality of care that might be available from providers outside their insurer's network.

"Consumerism is making an impact in every corner of the economy but the doctor's office," he said. "And that needs to change if we are to gain control of rising health care costs. The issue is 'value'—the merging of cost and quality. Americans are unmatched in seeking value in their consumer-goods purchases, and it is critical that the health care system be adjusted to reward a similar degree of diligence."

Swartzberg noted that Medicare recently made available the costs it pays hospitals for a number of procedures and that the agency's website— www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov—will eventually be refined so patients can input the treatment they are looking for and compare providers by location, cost, quality, complication rate, patient satisfaction and other factors.

"This is great," he said, "but as long as the vast majority of Americans see nothing personal to gain from accessing this kind of data, it is unlikely that very many will go to the trouble."

To that point, only 10% of survey respondents said they would be "extremely likely" to "shop around" for medical services if they could obtain information on the prices and quality of doctors and hospitals. Combined with the "very likely" responses (29%), the total percentage of respondents likely to shop around for health care remains below 40%.

This attitude also was reflected in the amount of time respondents said they spent researching their last major household purchase versus selecting a doctor. Responses averaged 20 days of research on the household purchase and only 9.7 days on the doctor.

“There is a real gap here, but the onus is not entirely on the American consumer,” Swartzberg said. “With traditional insurance paying the bill, there is no compelling reason for Americans to care about getting the best deal from their medical providers, and therein lies the problem. Americans are not health care consumers. Americans are passive users of a system that clearly doesn’t work. Truly effective consumerism creates knowledgeable and motivated consumers, which in turn lowers cost and improves quality and convenience.”

Studies show that consumer-directed health care, a concept that puts consumers in charge of their health care dollars and, under the best models, educates and motivates people to make the best health care choices, has tremendous potential to cut costs and encourage healthier lifestyles.

Members of the Destiny Health Plan are encouraged to make smart choices because they are rewarded for activities that improve their health and wellness.

“In order for consumerism to truly take hold in the American health care system, consumer-directed health plans must go beyond the basic notion of ‘saving money’ and give members the tools, resources and a good reason to think differently about how they consume health care services,” Swartzberg added.

For more information, visit www.destinyhealth.com or contact Eileen Rochford at 773-463-2480.

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