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Physician-owned hospitals work

By Patriot-News Op-Ed

December 08, 2009, 5:06AM

As Congress debates health care reform, consumers face losing the things the reform legislation is supposed to achieve: greater access to care, improved quality and lower costs. The reason is that the legislation would prohibit the development of any new physician-owned hospitals and severely restrict the growth of existing facilities.



Lost in the health care debate is the fact that physicians created some of the first hospitals in the country when they could no longer provide the level of care they believed their patients needed in their offices. Physicians are committed to putting the needs of their patients first, and physician-owned hospitals were created for that reason.

Harvard Business School professor Regina Herzlinger, one of the country's most knowledgeable and articulate experts on the U.S. health care system, calls physician-owned hospitals "focused factories." The physicians who own and practice in these hospitals do not claim to serve all needs; instead they focus on certain services and provide a superior level of care for patients.

The focused nature of physician-owned hospitals means they operate more efficiently than acute-care hospitals and provide quality care that comes from specialization. That care is delivered in a patient-centered environment that often has been designed by the physicians themselves.

The proposed legislation will harm all those associated with physician-owned hospitals and the communities they serve. There are several reasons this legislation should not be passed:

--Patients will be displaced and be forced into other hospitals that might not have the capacity to absorb the new cases. This could delay care.

--Limiting physician ownership of hospitals will reduce patients' choice in many communities for no reason other than the fear of competition and greed of many community hospitals.

--The closure of these hospitals will have an economic impact by eliminating \$2.4 billion in total payroll, \$509 million in federal taxes, \$2.6 billion in trade payables and will put 55,000 full and part-time employees out of work.

Not only would new physician-owned hospitals be prohibited, the legislation would halt all existing projects under development. There are 85 hospitals under development that will create an estimated 23,000 jobs that our economy desperately needs.

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The previous so-called "grandfather" provision would force many physicians to sell off part of their investment to meet the new ownership standards. In many cases it will be hard to find buyers willing to pay market value for the investment.

Existing hospitals would not be allowed to grow to meet community needs. The result of those limits is that the hospital would wither and die, effectively killing the sector.

Legislation limiting physician ownership would be particularly harmful to non-discretionary services such as diagnostic colonoscopies and cataract removal surgery. Establishing an appropriate ASC reimbursement level is important to ensuring continued access to services which improve and extend quality of life.

ASCs are a critical point of access for important screening benefits and other non-discretionary services such as diagnostic colonoscopies and cataract removal surgery. Establishing an appropriate ASC reimbursement level is important to ensuring continued access to services which improve and extend quality of life.

The American Hospital Association and the Federation of American Hospitals calls the health care reform legislation "a great step forward." The question is: for who? Certainly not for Pennsylvanians, who will have to receive care in the less-friendly, more expensive and higher risk environment of an acute-care hospital.

John Schario is CEO of Nueterra Healthcare in Kansas. **Michael West** is CEO of the Rothman Institute in Philadelphia.

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