

Aetna Joins National Trend of Rewarding Docs for Good Care

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Aetna Inc. is the second health insurance company operating in the mid-Atlantic to join a national program that gives financial rewards to doctors who meet national standards for patient care and running their practices efficiently.

The Connecticut-based health insurer plans to roll out a voluntary program next year in the Baltimore and Washington, D.C., areas that pays doctors \$80 yearly for each diabetic patient and \$160 for each heart patient treated according to national standards for high-quality care.

For example, a doctor that treats 100 diabetic patients according those the standards could earn an extra \$8,000. Aetna has not limited how much money it will spend.

The program, dubbed Bridges to Excellence, spans 12 states and incorporates 3,500 doctors nationwide. It was started April 2003 by large employers looking for cost-effective ways to improve care.

The idea behind the program is that better health care will ultimately reduce costs, especially among patients with diabetes or cardiovascular disease. The federal government also has embraced the concept of rewarding doctors for the quality of health care they provide, an idea known as "pay for performance."

Most of the savings comes from fewer visits to the hospital emergency room. For example, diabetics whose blood sugar, blood pressure and lipid levels are closely monitored wind up using emergency care less often, experts say.

"These are standards that nobody disagrees with," said Dr. Richard Fornadel, Aetna's medical director for the Baltimore area.

The program will require doctors to provide more documentation for clinical results. Rather than asking whether doctors prescribe a particular drug to a heart or diabetic patient, doctors have to document whether that drug worked.

However, some doctors, already frustrated by declining reimbursements from health insurers and increasing costs are skeptical about the concept.

Dr. George Bone, president of MedChi, the state's medical society, said programs like Aetna's could encourage doctors to treat healthier patients and not sick ones. And while health insurance premiums rise, Bone said, doctors are not seeing the benefits.

Maryland's largest health insurer, CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield, joined Bridges to Excellence last year in a three-year pilot program focused on improving how doctors manage their practices.

With 83 doctors participating, CareFirst last year gave out \$1.3 million in rewards to medical groups that improved electronic records systems, patient education and chronic disease management.

Dr. Jon Shematek, vice president of quality and medical policy at CareFirst, said tracking patients with high-cost conditions is a change from how doctors offices ope

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