

Simple Steps to Smarter Health Care

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wellness

Tricia is a young mother with a big problem. Her six-year-old, Emma, is still having coughing episodes two weeks after recovering from a cold. The coughing seems to be triggered by boisterous physical activity (Something a six-year-old is good at.). Tricia considers making an appointment with Emma's pediatrician, but it's a new year and Tricia has a new consumer-directed health plan. Suddenly, that decision to see the doctor is not so simple. Would going to the doctor be the right step, or is it really necessary? The cost of a visit matters to Tricia's pocketbook. She needs information.

With an estimated 6 million people enrolled in a consumer-directed health plan this year,¹ Tricia is not alone. With greater financial responsibility at stake, consumers are exercising more caution regarding when and if to seek care. The fact is, people need information to know what to do, and they expect their employers and health plans to help them find answers.

Does Tricia's employer have a role in helping her decide if she should call the doctor? If her employer wants Tricia to make good, informed health decisions and reduce costs, the answer is yes.

INFORMATION—IT'S ALL ABOUT DECISIONS

In health care, people make decisions about a lot of things:

- Decisions about healthy or unhealthy behaviors
- Decisions on whether and when to seek care
- Decisions about drugs, tests, and surgeries

Informed decision-making helps people gain knowledge about their medical decision and have more accurate beliefs and perceptions of the benefits and risks about diseases or conditions.ⁱⁱ Specifically, good decisions help people avoid unnecessary visits and services and reduce overall health care costs—including reducing hospital and emergency room visits.^{iii, iv}

Of course, the best way to reduce health care costs is for people to stay healthy. Wellness programs can go a long way toward having happier, healthier employees. But despite efforts to live a healthy life, the truth is, people get sick. And when they do, they need a reliable information source to help them manage their health.

BACK TO THE FUTURE: PRINTED SELF-CARE GUIDES THAT CONNECT TO ONLINE INFORMATION

Information comes from many different sources and from all sorts of media—online, on the phone, in the mail, etc. Perhaps the most important frontline resource could be made available right at her fingertips and right in her own home—a printed self-care guide that covers common health problems and help for knowing:

- When to call a doctor

- What home treatments are best
- Tips on prevention
- How to be an effective health care consumer
- Where to go on the Web for more detailed information

Good medical information is reliable and evidence based. It must be sensitive to individual learning preferences and easy to understand. And when it is easily accessible and used at the right time, it can significantly help people in a measurably favorable way. Because they are so handy, self-care guides are an excellent connection to more information online.

SO WHAT DID TRICIA DO?

Before picking up the phone, Tricia consulted the self-care guide given to her by her employer-sponsored health plan. Looking up "cough" in the index led Tricia to information that suggested that exercise-induced asthma might be the reason for Emma's lingering cough. The guide also provided a unique code linking Tricia to her health provider's Web site where she could find more in-depth information about asthma in children.

Armed with useful information and a list of questions to ask, Tricia made an appointment with the pediatrician. He confirmed that Emma had exercise-induced asthma. The pediatrician prescribed Emma medication to take before she plays, and her cough quickly subsided.

A LITTLE EFFORT GOES A LONG WAY

With just a little effort employers can help their employees:

- Reduce health care costs today and in the future
- Get the care that's the best choice for them
- Avoid medical errors by being involved in their own care and avoiding care they don't need **CDHC**

ⁱ Ramos, L et al. (2005). *Forrester's top 10 healthcare predictions for 2006*. Forrester Research.

ⁱⁱ Briss P et al. (2004). *Promoting Informed Decisions About Cancer Screening in Communities and Healthcare Systems*. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 26(1): 67-80.

ⁱⁱⁱ O'Connor AM et al. (1999). *Decision aids for patients facing health treatment or screening decisions: systematic review*. *British Medical Journal*, 319: 731-734.

^{iv} Lorig KR et al. (1999). *Evidence suggesting that a chronic disease self-management program can improve health status while reducing hospitalization: A randomized trial [Abstract]*. *Medical Care*, 37(1): 5-14. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=pubmed&dopt=Abstract&list_uids=10413387 (March 31, 2004).

As senior vice president of Healthwise, a national leader in consumer health information, Molly Mettler is a tireless advocate for a stronger role for health care consumers. Healthwise is a nonprofit organization that publishes the Healthwise® Handbook, a self-care guide that links to in-depth online information in the Healthwise Knowledgebase.