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Tri-State companies influence doctor choices

BY JAMES RITCHIE / STAFF REPORTER

GE Aviation and other major Greater Cincinnati employers are taking a new tack in controlling health care costs: getting directly involved in which doctors their workers see.

They want employees to seek care from physician practices certified as “patient-centered medical homes,” a model that emphasizes the primary-care doctor as quarterback for all care. Evendale-based GE Aviation is even considering paying its workers to choose such providers.

“We want to provide a compelling rewards and incentive plan that encourages strong wellness, screening and preventive primary care,” said Craig Osterhues, health care manager for the company, which has 7,400 local employees at its jet engine operations.



Joseph Benza, right, CEO of YourCity.MD, meets with Dr. Russell Vester, his firm's chief medical officer. Benza's company is building a database of “medical home” physician practices.



YourCity.MD has started on its project.

Employers Health, a coalition of nearly 300 employers mostly in Ohio, who work to influence the quality and cost of care, has arranged for Mason-based YourCity.MD to provide a searchable database of practices certified as patient-centered medical homes by the nonprofit National Committee for Quality Assurance. The employers, who also include Procter & Gamble Co. and Kroger Co., will promote the search tool and the patient-centered medical home concept to their employees.

In most cases that will – for now – mean marketing, with, for example, physicians coming to company sites to extol the virtues of the model. At GE Aviation, however, incentives will likely become part of health plan design as of Jan. 1, Osterhues said. He declined to say how much the incentives would be or how they might be distributed, citing ongoing planning.

‘MEDICAL HOME’ TREND

Sharron Dimario, director of community initiatives for Employers Health, said she knew of no other members introducing financial incentives for workers to get care from a patient-centered medical home.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if some chose to do that,” she said. “Employers are looking for things they can do to encourage employees to get the care they deserve.”

To get certified as a medical home, practices meet criteria in areas such as providing after-hours access, implementing evidence-based care guidelines and tracking the health of patient populations – diabetics, for example. Patients with multiple or complicated illnesses get appointments lasting 30 minutes instead of the usual 15. One goal is to save money by helping chronically ill patients, through thorough primary care, to avoid emergency-room visits and hospital stays.

Osterhues said about 40 Greater Cincinnati practices, most with three to five physicians, hold patient-centered medical home certification. They account for a fraction of the region’s 1,100 or so primary-care doctors.

The employers coalition “has commitments from the major health systems to move their practices through the process,” said Osterhues, a member of that organization’s board. “We feel we’re at a tipping point where the patient-centered medical home becomes the norm.”

He said GE Aviation is gearing efforts toward employees who don’t have a primary-care doctor.

Joseph Benza, CEO of YourCity.MD, however, said employers and insurers want to encourage workers “to make great health care decisions by financially incenting them to change doctors.”

The database of practices went live this week. Benza said his company didn’t charge to create the search tool. His firm, which operates sites throughout the country with information and ratings on

A NEW MODEL

A coalition of about 300 companies have arranged for YourCity.MD to create a database of “medical home” practices.

Cincinnati employees can use the information to help choose a specific doctor.

health providers, benefits from the exposure.

Dr. Russell Vester, chief medical officer for YourCity.MD, said he expects a third to half of area primary-care practices to be certified within two years. The interest from marquee employers, he said, will put pressure on doctors to get on board – otherwise they risk being passed over by well-insured patients.

“This is a new label for the way the best doctors have always practiced,” said Vester, who’s also chairman at Cardiac, Vascular & Thoracic Surgeons in Norwood. “People are starting to acknowledge the value of good primary care.” Physicians practices have other reasons to pursue patient-centered medical home status.

In a recent pilot project, the region’s major insurers – Anthem, United-Healthcare and Humana – provided as much as \$6 per patient per month in “care management” funds to 11 practices that earned certification. The pilot was organized by the Health Improvement Collaborative of Greater Cincinnati.

Medicare is also operating patient-centered medical home demonstration programs throughout the country.

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