



Managed care under attack from US physicians

Reacting to the professional and economic restraints imposed by managed care, doctors in California and New York are taking to one of the world's newest technologies — the Internet — in an attempt to encourage patients to return to old-fashioned “private medicine” without all of the “managers.”

The Independent Doctors of California, which represents 5 groups with 300 physician members, is preparing a Web site to help patients find doctors willing to treat them outside of managed care settings, even though they would have to pay more for the privilege.

On the opposite coast, the Association of Independent Physicians has mobilized some 80 doctors at New York's largest hospitals with the battle cry that doctors and their patients should be the only ones making decisions about patient care. Dr. Barry Chaiken, a Manhattan ophthalmologist and driving force behind the group, says that by signing on with HMOs, doctors are delegating medical decisions to managers concerned primarily with increasing profits. The

New York association is also planning a Web site, and its member doctors will provide patients with literature explaining the advantages of seeing “independent” doctors, even if it means running afoul of their HMO's rules.

Most HMOs require their members to seek care only from physicians contracted within their network, and usually only after first obtaining referrals and permission from primary care doctors accountable to HMO managers. Some HMOs will allow members to seek services from physicians outside the HMO network, but only after paying a substantial copayment of as much as 30%. Others may require them to pay the entire fee.

Although the growth of “independent” associations illustrates significant professional dissatisfaction with managed care, the American Medical Association says that more than 90% of medical practices in the US now have contracts with managed care companies. As well, 85% of all American employees are enrolled in some form of managed care. Only 15% of employees are now covered by tradi-

tional indemnity insurance plans, which pay hospitals and doctors on a conventional fee-for-service basis.

Recently, many New York physicians had a brutal experience with managed care following the terrifying financial free-fall of Oxford Health Plans Inc. It is one of the nation's largest managed care companies, with 1.9 million people enrolled in New York State alone. The New York County Medical Society is now suing Oxford for \$140 million in unpaid claims, citing the company for “delays, denials and detours from acceptable practice.” Oxford was also recently fined \$3 million by the New York State Attorney General for failing to comply with state managed care regulations, but is seeking a turnaround thanks to new financial sources.

Published reports indicate that the Association of American Physicians and Surgeons, a group of 4000 doctors favouring “private medicine,” is helping the fledgling “independent” doctors' groups, and hopes to form a coalition that will expand across the country. — © *Milan Korcok*

Cool sites

www.acupuncture.com

I know a doctor who spent 6 weeks in China studying acupuncture. Now you can save yourself the time and airfare by checking out this site, which answers frequently asked questions. Where do I buy acupuncture needles? How can acupuncture be used in smoking-cessation therapy? There are solemn patient testimonials about “cures” for problems as diverse as acne rosacea and ulcerative colitis. Not satisfied with anecdotal evidence? There's also a section on acupuncture-related research in the medical literature, with abstracts from diverse sources. These include the *Journal of Traditional Chinese Medicine* and the *Swedish Dental Journal*. (Many other journals are cited, but they are either published in a language other than English or are “outside the mainstream.”) A guide allows users to find acupuncturists in their area, and details about how to collect further information about acupuncture education and training are provided. Finally, the site also has a primer on traditional Chinese medicine, including herbology and *qi gong*, the cultivation of energy through exercise. Whether you are a sceptic or true believer when it comes to acupuncture, chances are a patient will eventually seek your opinion. This site will help familiarize you with some of the questions before they are asked. — Dr. Robert Patterson, robpaterson@email.msn.com