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Groundbreaking Study Reveals How Consumers Shop for Health Care *Research finds people want information on cost and quality*

PORTLAND – The number of people inclined to comparison shop for medical services such as knee surgery could be much higher than previously thought, according to groundbreaking research conducted by Regence.

Seven out of 10 consumers indicated they would seek out information such as price and quality for medical services, according to a recent survey of 2,000 people in the states Regence serves: Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Utah.

“This data fills a gap in our knowledge about consumers, and opens a window on how people would shop for health care,” said Robert Harris, who oversees Regence market research.

Regence developed the parameters for the research, and respondents, both insured and uninsured, were chosen by an independent firm for their Internet shopping habits. Participants were asked to select one of 25 health care services they might need in the next five years and polled about their information-seeking behavior. The 25 non-urgent services were the types that would allow time for research, such as childbirth or diagnostic testing. Both covered and non-covered services (such as teeth-whitening) were included.

Of those who thought they would seek out information, 78 percent indicated a preference for quality, while 74 percent indicated a preference for cost. Taken as a whole, almost 50 percent of all 2,000 respondents said they would be “very likely” to compare provider quality, seek out information from reputable medical sources and to rely on the reputation of the service provider.

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These results indicate substantially higher interest in cost and quality information than other research into consumer behavior, Harris said.

Further findings indicated:

- People with health insurance were more likely to research quality than cost.
- People without health insurance – 8 in 10 – were more likely to research cost than quality; this is significantly higher than insured respondents.
- The breakpoint for health care comparison shopping is higher than for consumer goods. The median price at which people shop for health care is \$500, but only \$199 for durable consumer goods.

Additionally, about one-third of all respondents said they would be “very likely” to compare prices of medical services. Further analysis and research is needed, Harris said, but initial indications are that a substantial portion of people could be shifted toward more consumer-minded health care behavior.

Quality and effectiveness of medical care are of increasing concern to patients. Some experts estimate that erroneous or unwarranted medical intervention is the third leading cause of death in the U.S., taking anywhere from 105,000 to 275,000 lives a year.

A dose of consumerism is promoted by many as an ingredient to remedy the ailing health care system. If people could compare which treatments work better and what they cost, the theory goes, providers would feel pressure to compete on successful outcomes, prices and their own formula for customer service. Currently, regional and national efforts to corral quality and cost information are scarce and scattered.

“It’s the Wild West out there for quality information, but hopefully this new insight that we have gained into consumer preferences will help us to move the dial in the right direction,” Harris said.

About Regence

Regence the largest health insurer in the Northwest/Intermountain Region, serving nearly three million members as Regence BlueShield of Idaho, Regence BlueCross BlueShield of Oregon, Regence BlueCross BlueShield of Utah and Regence BlueShield (in Washington). Each plan is a not-for-profit independent licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association. Regence is committed to improving the health of our members and our communities, and to transforming our health care system. For more information, please visit www.regence.com.

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