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EDITORIAL

Mandate transparency

If you've ever had the misfortune of getting ill and having to go to a hospital for treatment or a procedure, then you've likely also experienced anxiety as you wonder what the ordeal is going to cost you.

Sadly, when it comes to health care costs in New Mexico, consumers are pretty much in the dark until they get the bill in the mail. By then, the expense has already been incurred and there's little to do but suck it up and fork out your portion of whatever that bill happens to be.

Contrast the way we buy health services in New Mexico with the way most of us handle other major purchases like appliances or even a vehicle. Most of us shop around, comparing things like price and consumer reports before we buy those things. We shop around because we don't want to pay too much and because we don't want to end up with a lemon.

But that type of analysis just isn't possible when it comes to our health care because the information just isn't publicly available.

Think New Mexico, a Santa Fe-based think tank, is trying to change that. The organization is recommending that lawmakers approve legislation that requires the state to create a user-friendly public website that would disclose hospital price and quality information for common medical procedures like hip replacements. The organization notes that much of the information is already being reported by hospitals to the state Health Department, but the information isn't available to the public.

This isn't a new concept. In fact, 19 other states have either already created health care

transparency websites or are in the process of doing so.

Lawmakers will also have to ban so-called "gag clauses" in contracts between hospitals and insurers in order to make price transparency a reality here.

Think New Mexico is also asking state lawmakers to end price discrimination, the practice of charging patients at the same hospital receiving the same treatment from the same doctor different prices depending on who is paying the bill. The organization wants the Legislature to require hospitals to charge the same price to every patient for the same procedure, regardless of who is paying the bills.

These are commonsense reforms that would benefit us all, and we urge state lawmakers to implement them. Fortunately, the Legislature just kicked off a 60-day session on Tuesday, meaning it will have plenty of time to get this important work done.

For anyone who thinks these reforms are a waste of time, consider this:

Think New Mexico did its own digging into healthcare costs in New Mexico, and it found that the difference in cost for the same procedures at different New Mexico hospitals varies by tens of thousands of dollars. One example cited by the organization showed a more than \$50,000 price difference between two hospitals for the same treatment. And then there's the fact that New Mexicans are increasingly paying more out of pocket for medical care.

This is an important issue, and we hope that our state lawmakers will agree that the time to act on it is now.