



Title: **Think New Mexico can fix health care**
 Author:
 Size: 40.92 square inch
 Clovis, NM Circulation: 5735

Think New Mexico can fix health care

There are two things in particular that I like about Think New Mexico: It's nonpartisan and it's pragmatic.

Both are reasons why this homegrown think tank is so effective. From getting the sales tax lifted off food to making full-day kindergarten accessible to all New Mexico children, whenever this 15-year-old group tackles an issue, things start to happen.

And now, Think New Mexico is taking on health care, not with some politically motivated agenda to repeal or reinforce Obamacare, but with some well-researched recommendations that are actually do-able — even during these divisive times in which we live.

According to our New Mexican thinkers, one way to address the skyrocketing cost of health care is to create a state website that has cost and quality-of-care data about the state's hospitals — including some information that's not currently available to the public — so people can compare providers for the best value before deciding on where to go for treatment.

Plus, our thinkers tell us, we must level the field when it

comes to what people are charged, because all is not fair in the world of health care pricing.

To do all this requires some changes in state law, and Think New Mexico has figured that out too — and you can bet they'll be poised and ready for the upcoming legislative session.

You can read all about it in Think New Mexico's latest publication, Making Health Care More Affordable, released earlier this month.

www.thinknewmexico.org

It's no secret that health care costs are increasing at a far greater rate than inflation — has been for years now, even before the Affordable Care Act — but there are still more than a quarter million New Mexicans without health insurance, while others are having to pay higher deductibles. For a lot of people seeking health services, out-of-pocket expenses are way up these days.

But good luck doing any comparison shopping for your health care. Contractual "gag clauses" between hospitals and insurance companies often keep charges hidden, so if you're in need of, say, an

angioplasty, you can't necessarily find out how much it will cost you until after the fact, when you're back home and recovering.

Plus, each hospital charges different amounts for its medical services — with rates contained in its "chargemaster" list. It's sort of like the hospital's "asking price" for its services, where negotiations for your final charges actually begin.

Those chargemaster rates can be very different from one hospital to another. Think New Mexico's report includes a chart listing six common health conditions, from pneumonia to joint replacements, and what specific hospitals around the state charge. The differences, based on 2012 data, are stark.

Treating septicemia (blood poisoning), for example, cost \$19,556 at Holy Cross Hospital in Taos, while only 75 miles down the road, at Alta Vista Regional Hospital in Las Vegas, it cost a jaw-dropping \$72,346.

Now, remember that everybody gets to negotiate, to try to get their hospital bills below the hospital's charge-

master rates. But it's the biggest insurance companies that have the strongest bargaining power.

Think New Mexico's report points this out as "price discrimination" — and that's exactly what it is.

Think New Mexico says such discrimination can be eliminated with a state law that requires the hospitals to charge all payers — individuals, insurers and Medicaid and Medicare recipients (those last two will require a federal waiver) — the same price for the same service, with no discounts except for indigent patients.

If anybody can get that done, it's Think New Mexico.

Tom McDonald is editor of the New Mexico Community News Exchange. Contact him at:

tmcDonald@gazette mediaservices.com



Tom McDonald

◆
State columnist