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Public should be able to shop healthcare

Rio Grande Sun

Think New Mexico is routinely described as a bipartisan progressive think tank. We like to think of that organization as the New Mexico House of Representatives, Senate and governor, without the politics, self-serving agenda, lack of intestinal fortitude and endless supply of hot air.

In short, Think New Mexico does every year exactly what the legislative process should be doing: addressing New Mexico's problems and coming up with solutions.

This year, Think is trying to lower health care costs by getting legislation passed that would allow users (rate-payers) to "shop" for their health care. Not their insurance, that's already proven a losing game. We're talking about shopping for your actual care.

Massachusetts, a national leader in health care insurance and care renovation, has already done this. It is the first state to mandate health care costs (procedures) be open to users.

National Public Radio aired a short piece November 6 on shopping for health care procedures in that state.

The correspondent found a bone density test can cost from \$190 to \$445.

Massachusetts Undersecretary for Consumer Affairs Barbara Anthony said it was essential to "let the

light shine in on health care costs in Massachusetts."

Hospitals don't want to be the highest in the price range when consumers look up a procedure's cost online. That makes sense and the nice thing about hospitals is that they don't like each other. Competition is fierce. Anthony said she wasn't sure if exposing price differences would drive down costs. But we expect sensible, rational pricing in other things we buy. Health care costs are anything but that.

Imagine buying a car without knowing the price and all the options. Why can't we do that with a colonoscopy?

Another comparison showed an upper back MRI ranged from \$614 at New England Baptist, to \$1,800 at Boston Children's Hospital. The difference in cost could amount to months of premiums to some people or families.

Think New Mexico Executive Director Fred Nathan quotes Princeton University economist Uwe Reinhardt who compared the opaque pricing of health care to shopping in a department store blindfolded and months later receiving an incomprehensible statement that states, "pay this amount."

We have some recent experience at this and are baffled that hospitals can send you a one-page bill for tens of thousands of dollars, with no explanation.

Health care providers may squawk but this is a rather simple fix. It requires hospitals, clinics and doctors to post prices, probably a simple update of a web site, and maintain it.

The question remains whether cash and lobbyists representing health care providers will beat Nathan and his group. This is a case of common sense being beaten back by special interests.

Contact your representative and senator and tell them you would like to be able to shop for your health care procedures.

