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Health Reform Column:
Prevention among elderly can yield financial savings

The following is a column by Garon Cox, President, Chief Executive Officer and General Counsel for Medicalodges, Inc. and Board Member for the Kansas Health Policy Authority Board, regarding prevention among elderly populations as a cost-control mechanism for health care in Kansas.

As America ages and more individuals enter the 65 and older population, health care expenditures are expected to rise. By the year 2030, spending for health care is projected to increase by 25% due solely to the shift in the elderly population.

Over 80% of older individuals have at least one chronic condition while 62% of seniors and 70% of individuals over age 80 have two or more chronic conditions. Because 95% of all health care costs among older Americans is attributed to chronic diseases, preventing these ailments and properly managing them is an important mechanism for containing costs.

Many efforts pertaining to prevention have targeted youth to minimize their future health care risks. A population that tends to go missing from prevention programs includes the elderly. While health risks do increase with age, poor health is not inevitable and can still be prevented and minimized.

According to the 2007 State-by-State Report Card on Healthy Aging by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Kansas ranked well below the bottom half for many prevention strategies in elderly populations, including participating in physical activity, eating five or more servings of fruits and vegetables, receiving a flu or pneumonia vaccination in the past year, having a colorectal screening, and testing cholesterol levels. Such prevention efforts have been shown to reduce health care costs. For example, \$4.50 of cost savings is associated with \$1.00 invested in physical activity interventions for older adults with hip fractures. In addition, every senior vaccinated for pneumococcal saves the U.S. \$294 in health care costs over a two-year period while every year influenza vaccinations yield \$117 in cost savings per person.

In efforts to reform the health care system in Kansas, paying for prevention and a primary care medical home to better coordinate and manage chronic conditions among elderly populations can result in immediate cost savings. The baby boom generation will soon cause great strain on our health care system, and it is important for Kansans to realize the potential benefits that prevention and care coordination can have for this population in both health status and health care costs.

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The Health Policy Authority is a state agency created to develop and maintain a coordinated and data-driven health policy agenda, and it was tasked this year with reforming health care delivery in Kansas. On November 1, 2007, the Board will report to the Governor and Kansas Legislature health reform options aimed at improving the health and health care system in Kansas. To stay informed about health reform activities, please visit our webpage, <http://www.khpa.ks.gov/HealthReformHome.htm>.

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