

MEDICAL CARE COST EFFECTIVE QUALITY CARE – HOW DO WE GET THERE?

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Obamacare is under fire again and whether you voted for our current president or not, most of us will agree that our medical health care premiums are too expensive, our medical deductibles are too high and copayments are continuing to rise and formularies (covered prescription medications) continue to shrink. So how can we really have affordable, quality healthcare? Education and utilization of sources of care are two major factors.

As my office closed out 2016 with a record number of office visits, I am reminded that my office is only one source for the initial care of a medical problem. In just over the last 20 years there have become 4 sources of outpatient medical care in our community, which include emergency rooms, urgent cares, retail clinics and primary care physician's offices.

Emergency rooms are obviously for emergencies so it surprised me to find that it is estimated that at least 50% or more of patients seen in emergency rooms are seen for nonemergent medical problems. Why is that important? Emergency rooms are the most expensive form of care available. The CDC reports 136 million ER visits which overloads our emergency rooms and takes time away from patients who are very sick. It is estimated that excess ER utilization cost \$18 billion.

Urgent cares evolved in the 1990s to serve Americans without access to primary care at night or on weekends. Urgent cares provide easy access to quality healthcare. Urgent cares are designed for acute patient problems that are not life threatening but cannot wait until a primary care physician can see them. Urgent care is not and should not be a substitute for primary care. Urgent cares are also not designed to provide care for chronic (long term) medical complaints. Therefore, if you have to wait days for an appointment with your primary care physician for an acute problem, an urgent care is a good option. Although urgent care visits are less costly than emergency room visits, the cost is still up to twice as much as a primary care office visit.

Walk in retail clinics are typically staffed by nurse practitioners and or physician assistants. Physician back up is not available most of the time. The cost of retail clinics is the least costly form of medical care but also specializes only in minor injuries and illnesses. A retail clinic is not a good choice with a complicated problem or a child with complicated medical history.

Next month we will discuss more on selecting the most appropriate source of care for your child's acute medical problem.