

Consumer groups, insurers band together to push down drug costs

By JULIE JETTE
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BOSTON - Consumer groups and health insurance companies are forming a coalition to fight rising prescription drug costs - another initiative in a growing number of efforts in the state to get spiraling health care costs under control.

Among the members of the Massachusetts Prescription Reform Coalition are Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, the state's largest insurer, the AARP and the American Heart/American Stroke Association.

"It seems to us that in the list of elements of health care waste and inefficiency, that the inappropriate marketing of drugs by the drug industry to providers ought to be a significant, serious target," said John McDonough, executive director of Health Care For All, a Bay State patient advocacy group that is spearheading the coalition.

The group is seeking to limit the value of gifts that drug companies can give to doctors to stop some particularly aggressive drug company marketing tactics, and to promote the spread of objective information about the effectiveness of various drugs.

The launch of the coalition comes shortly before state Sen. President Therese Murray, D-Plymouth, is expected to release a much-anticipated bill that will target medical inflation.

Currently, drug companies are heavily involved with educating doctors about their own products. They also engage in a marketing practice called "data mining" in which they learn exactly how much of various drugs particular doctors prescribe, enabling them to finely tailor their pitches to doctors.

Officials involved with the state's health care reform law have said that without some reduction in medical-cost inflation, reform efforts will likely fail. The law requires most adults to have medical insurance, and proponents fear that rising medical costs could make the cost of new, cheaper policies for individuals more prohibitive.

"To sustain Massachusetts' health reform and make it work, we must tackle rising costs - we have to," said McDonough.

Dr. Daniel Carlat, a psychiatrist practicing in Newburyport, spent a year accompanying drug sales representatives to primary care doctors' offices for Wyeth Pharmaceuticals. Carlat said he stopped working with the company because he was uncomfortable with the sales tactics.

"Really what I was there for from the company's perspective was to be a more legitimate-sounding sales representative," Carlat said.

Before meeting with doctors, sales reps would provide him with market research showing whether a particular doctor was a high-prescriber, and whether he or she was likely to be a tough or easy sell.

Many primary care doctors were not tough customers when it came to the antidepressant drugs he was helping to sell, Carlat said.

"They don't have the time to do a lot of research," he said. "They weren't going to go into the research literature."

Rob Restuccia, executive director of the Prescription Project, a national organization that is working to reduce the influence of drug companies on prescribing habits, said aggressive marketing leads to unnecessary prescribing.

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