

# Fiscal cliff affects U.S. health care, too



**LYNN EVANS**

With Congress staring at the fiscal cliff, entitlements are on the cutting table. As all reputable economists agree, the federal budget cannot be brought into balance without both increases in revenue (i.e. tax increases) and cuts to the entitlements that make up the majority of the federal budget. And the big ticket entitlements are Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security.

So whatever had been the results of the past election, the way America delivers and pays for health care will have to change and is, in fact, already changing.

Medicare has already made changes to discourage hospitals from readmitting patients after they have been discharged and sent home, by fining hospitals whose readmission rate is significantly higher than average. This new policy is forcing doctors, nurses and hospitals to spend more time with patients before they go home to make sure the patient and family know what they need to do to

stay on the path to recovery. Some hospitals are hiring nurse case managers to phone the patient and make home visits to make sure the patient is progressing. In the long run, this makes for better care and healthier patients, as well as saves a lot of money.

Medicaid has joined with State Health Department here in Mississippi and those in other states to institute new policies proven to decrease premature deliveries. Medical experts are now finding that being born prematurely can affect a person's lifetime health. The many pronged effort discourages elective deliveries and C-sections before 39 weeks, encourages small local hospitals to send women in early labor to hospitals with high-level medical expertise for mother and baby's care, and makes drugs proven to prevent early delivery more readily available to those women who need them. Medicaid will also help pregnant women and women planning a baby to quit smoking, as smoking has been proven to increase the chance that a baby is born prematurely.

Mississippi businesses are pioneering new ways to keep their employees healthy, both because it helps the bottom line and improves employee morale. On-site clinics

staffed by nurse practitioners, encouraging employees to exercise with health club memberships or on site exercise rooms, and generally treating their work force as "high value employees" is paying off for businesses like Viking and Butler Snow.

The biggest change promising to transform the American health care system is a change in focus from tests, procedures and pharmaceuticals to preventive care, the Patient Centered Medical Home, and early diagnosis and treatment with an aim toward preventing costly long-term care. End of life care is already changing as seniors use living wills to make clear what medical interventions they do and do not want, and physicians discourage radical procedures and operations for the elderly that are unlikely to improve quality of life.

Americans who see the federal debt as the No. 1 problem facing the country will have to be ready to support changes in the medical care they receive today and in the future, as well as increasing taxes at least for the wealthiest Americans, if Congress is to reach a workable solution to avert the fiscal cliff.

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