A New Program for Sharing Medical Cost Information

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The assumption that market principles apply to the choices consumers (that is, patients) make about their medical care is an important part of health care policy and regulations in the United States. This assumption, however, belies the facts that health care is mostly not paid for out of pocket, that consumers cannot really evaluate their care (there are minimal or no ratings of the type provided by Consumer Reports for physicians and hospitals), and that consumers are purchasing goods and services without any advance knowledge of what they will actually cost. Without knowing either quality or price, it is impossible for marketplace principles to apply. In her Viewpoint, Aliferis, a health care journalist, describes a bold attempt to change this situation in the San Francisco and Los Angeles metropolitan areas. PriceCheck is a new program that invites patients to share information about what they have paid for common medical tests and procedures. Because newer health insurance plans, including many of those offered on health insurance exchanges under the Affordable Care Act, often have substantial copays, such as percentage of the cost of a medical test, this information really matters to patients. PriceCheck has started to supply that essential information. Similar projects are already underway in other communities. I hope to continue to see these programs expand as part of an effort to provide essential information for patients and clinicians to make wise and informed choices in health care.

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