

Coeur d'Alene Press, Monday, March 14, 2011 -- by Nick Rotunno (2 pages)

Posting the cost of health care

Bill would list online the price of the most common procedures

COEUR d'ALENE - Rep. Bob Nonini, R-Coeur d'Alene, proposed legislation Friday in Boise that would provide detailed, online information for citizens seeking affordable health care. The Idaho Health Care Transparency Act of 2011 - the bill will be given its official number today - calls for a new website administered by the Idaho Department of Insurance. Health care facilities would be required to post online the cost of their 25 most common procedures.

According to Nonini and Rep. Frank Henderson, R-Post Falls - a supporter of the bill - consumers will be able to browse the website, compare rates at different hospitals and make informed health care decisions. "We started to ask questions like, 'Gee, why is health care so expensive?'" he said. "I think the consumer should have a choice. We just think this will help level the playing field. It's getting unaffordable."

The legislators pointed to health care charge comparisons, based on a typical 80/20 insurance policy. At large hospitals, common procedures like knee surgeries, gall bladder operations and hernia repair cost patients hundreds of dollars. At smaller, specialty facilities or clinics, those procedures often cost much less.

Because they offer a very wide range of services, large hospitals cost-shift, Nonini explained. They also treat patients without health insurance, which can drive up the price of care.

"We want to leave it up to private industry," Nonini said. "And the consumer should have the right to this information. Idahoans call up hospitals every day to figure out what something is going to cost them. Idahoans should have the right to go and compare."

Similar legislation is already on the books in about 30 states, said Vaughn Ward, CEO of Northwest Specialty Hospital in Post Falls. The Idaho website would likely be modeled after Wisconsin's, which is easy to follow and straightforward. The Wisconsin site allows users to search for inpatient, outpatient or emergency care. The search is narrowed by city or county. Once a hospital is selected, users can look over the median charges of the 75 most common services. Other states have shorter lists. Oregon, for example, only posts the top 10 procedures at each hospital.

Idaho's website data would be updated annually by the Department of Insurance director, in consultation with hospitals and clinics, according to the bill. Hopefully, Ward said, the cost of 25 procedures would be just the beginning. He would like to see hospitals list as many as 75 or more. The bill will face serious opposition from large hospitals and insurance companies, Nonini said, and "at the end of the day, it's very political."

"This is going to be very explosive," Ward said. "This is going to be very unpopular with people who don't want this to happen." The bill will most likely be considered in a House Business Committee hearing early this week. Seniors' skills behind the wheel come under scrutiny, but numbers say they're among the safest on the road