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Forum looks at realities, challenges of health care system

Regence Blueshield president talks reform

By Zach Hagadone

IDAHO BUSINESS REVIEW

John Stellmon, president of Regence Blueshield of Idaho, isn't coy about the reality of the health care system in America: "Fundamentally, it is broken," he said.

He's equally up-front about the reasons: "It's the prices, stupid," he said, quoting from a 2003 article published in the policy journal *Health Affairs*.

"The reality is that we just pay more for health services in this country than what is paid for in other countries," he said. "I'm not saying it's right or wrong, but fundamentally we have to look at what health services cost in this country and decide whether or not its something we want to pay for."

Stellmon will join Ed Dahlberg, CEO of St. Luke's Health System; Joe Messmer, CEO of Mercy Medical Center; Doug Dammrose, chief medical officer of Blue Cross of Idaho; Tom Patterson, of the Saltzer Medical Group; and state Sen. John McGee for the Health Care Reality Forum next month, which will cover challenges faced by health care providers, what universal health care could mean and the growing impact of charity care and bad debt.

As president of one of the largest health insurance providers in Idaho, Stellmon said a major challenge facing the health care system is a misalignment of reimbursement.

"The system of reimbursement is based not upon an incentive to make the

community healthier, the system of reimbursement is based on units of care, or episodes of care," he said. "If we can agree that the objective of the system is to improve community health, then we can get at reimbursement systems that make that the incentive."

As President Barack Obama works through the ongoing financial crisis, he has made health care reform a key part of the remedy. Stellmon said many of the president's proposals are on the right track, but for reform to truly work it has to come from providers and patients, not the government.

"If you can combine both government and private enterprise to access the premium for everybody, and you can align the incentives in such a way that you're paying for health improvement, there's enough money to provide baseline coverage for every American, every

Idahoan," he said. "But you've got to coordinate it so everybody participates and the community is responsible for a baseline amount of care for everybody. I don't believe that everybody has a right to have society pay for whatever health care choices they make."

The Health Care Reality Forum will be held April 14 at the Nampa Civic Center, with a breakfast, keynote address from Boise State University football coach Chris Peterson and panel discussion from 7 a.m. until 9:30 a.m. A health care education series will be held from 9:30 a.m. until noon, covering topics including: *Worksite Wellness*, *Employee Health Plans*, *Health Insurance 101* and the *Impact of Legislative Actions in Real Life*.

The panel will be moderated by Dee Sarton, of KTVB — Idaho's News Channel 7. Registration costs \$25.