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John Kloss and Jeffrey Hessing (2 pages)

Orthopedic group wants to work with Blue Cross to help patients

A message from the Idaho Orthopedic Society:

Recently, you have read articles in the newspaper and seen notices from orthopedic groups throughout the state announcing that orthopedic physicians were terminating their contracts with Blue Cross of Idaho. These physicians did not want to take this step. Blue Cross would like you to think this is all about money, but it is not. All of the physicians in Idaho are dealing with an out-of-date and unfair contracting system that negatively impacts the delivery of high quality, cost-effective health care.

Physicians sign contracts agreeing to provide medical care for patients; the insurance companies agree to reimburse the physicians for this medical care. It sounds straightforward, but it is not. These contracts go on forever unless terminated - an evergreen contract. The companies can make unilateral (one-sided) changes without discussing them with the physicians.

The physicians either have to accept these changes or give 90 days notice that they intend to terminate the contract. This is what your orthopedic physicians had to do to bring Blue Cross to the table to discuss these important health care issues. Physicians are not allowed to bargain as a group, only as individuals or individual practices. This allows the insurance companies to try to divide and conquer to the detriment of the delivery of cost-effective health care to our patients.

What your orthopedic physician wants is straightforward: a time-limited contract that must be renegotiated periodically; a published reasonable fee equal for all orthopedists; a reasonable cost of living increase; an agreed upon method for paying for multiple procedures done in the same setting; and a simple appeals process.

Orthopedic offices have now been contacted and advised that if they will rescind their termination, then Blue Cross will sit down and discuss contracts.

At the same time, Blue Cross has implied that if your orthopedic physicians do not agree to contract, Blue Cross will cancel contracts with ambulatory surgery centers and specialty hospitals with which your orthopedic surgeons are affiliated. This is no way to work with the health care community toward providing quality care at a reasonable cost.

Blue Cross has further complicated your care by notifying patients and primary care physicians that those orthopedists who intend to terminate their contracts in 90 days are immediately no longer eligible to see you as participating physicians. This is not the case. Until the date of termination, all participating orthopedists are willing and able to see you on the same terms that currently apply. Even after the termination date, your orthopedist will continue to treat your orthopedic problems at reasonable rates. Call them if you have questions.

Our goal is to have these contract issues resolved before the effective termination dates.

The Idaho Orthopedic Society feels that it is our duty to inform and educate our members and the public regarding the complexities of health care issues. There are less than 120 orthopedic physicians to serve the 1.4 million residents of Idaho. We want - and will continue - to provide our patients and friends with the best orthopedic care available.

It is time that this antiquated contract system is changed - not just for orthopedic physicians, but for all the physicians in Idaho as well as the Idaho residents who wish to use Blue Cross of Idaho for their health insurance needs.

On behalf of the Idaho Orthopedic Society: Troy Watkins, M.D., is president; John Kloss, M.D., is on Board of Councilors; and Jeffrey Hessing, M.D., is chairman of Special Unity Committee.