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Blue Cross outlines cost-control efforts

The insurer warns the governor's task force that the rising cost of health care could start to bankrupt businesses.

Spending more money on health care doesn't make Idahoans healthier, but it hurts employers trying to compete globally and may hurt some Idahoans' wallets unless change comes soon.

"Soon, we will see more and more bankruptcies associated with health care costs," said Dr. Doug Dammrose, senior vice president and chief medical officer of Blue Cross of Idaho, during a presentation to the governor's Health Care Task Force, which is tasked with looking at health care issues in Idaho. At a meeting Monday in Boise, outlined a number of problems, including:

- Thirty percent of every dollar may be spent on care that is inefficient, inappropriate or redundant.
- Patients get the care that is shown to work best only half the time.
- Obesity, smoking, alcohol and drug abuse boost the number of expensive, chronic diseases.

Dammrose explained several ways the insurer is trying to change unhealthy behaviors and the chronic diseases that may accompany them.

Case management is one answer for certain diseases, including diabetes, Dammrose said. Case management may include handouts, telephone calls from a trained provider or one-on-one work to help diabetic patients get their disease under control. That, in turn, reduces the number of expensive side effects, such as eye problems, that can plague diabetics.

In another Blue Cross effort, a program called "Color Me Healthy," implemented in preschools in Boise and other cities, teaches small children the joys of eating fruits and vegetables.

The goal is to prevent obesity. So far, 1,800 youngsters across the state have been taught the message, but the outcome is not clear. "It's too early to tell whether it is changing their obesity index or anything like that," Dammrose said.

The company also is trying to trim the number of expensive imaging tests patients get, especially in emergency rooms, by requiring health care providers to get permission first.