

Free Screening of Health Care's 'Inconvenient Truth' on Thursday

By Carol Harrison

Jay Reed is a numbers guy, and the numbers the local accountant sees around health care are scary.

He was “shocked” at his share of cost, “thousands out of my own pocket,” for a surgical treatment option that was never explained to him from a cost perspective.

He was “concerned” when he completed 2013 tax preparation for a couple in their early sixties who “didn’t make much to begin with, but spent 20 to 25 percent of their income on health care.”

He’s seen the Medicare estimates that health care costs will consume one-fifth of the gross domestic product by the end of the decade, and he’s watched annual premiums for his firm increase faster than revenues.

“In my experience, a good year is maybe a 10 percent (premium) increase,” he said. “More and more employers are getting to where they just can’t cover what they used to. Affordability is a huge factor, and the trend I see is more and more costs being borne by the consumer.”

Reed thinks the consumer has the “purest interest” in health care overall and must get involved in finding the “appropriate balance point” between cost and quality.

“It’s the consumer’s responsibility to understand what is going on and know how to get more appropriate care,” he said.

That’s why he’ll be at the Eureka Theater, 612 F St., from 6 to 8:30 p.m. Thursday for a free screening of “Escape Fire,” an award-winning documentary about American’s health care system.

“It’s going to show a different side of the story about what is going on, a side that people aren’t easily getting otherwise,” Reed said last week from his office at Aalfs, Evans & Co. “A lot of people are at different points of understanding about what the reality is in health care, what’s working and not working, and what the opportunities are for the consumer community to make a difference.”

The film follows human stories about patients and industry leaders as it examines the “powerful forces maintaining the status quo, a medical industry designed for quick fixes rather than prevention” and “for profit-driven care rather than patient-driven care.”

“Escape Fire” won top documentary honors at the Newport Beach and Berkshire Film festivals and was a 2012 selection for the Sundance Film Festival.

“The film is health care’s ‘An Inconvenient Truth,’” joked Rosemary DenOuden, chief operating officer of the Humboldt Del Norte Foundation for Medical Care and Independent Practice Association.

HDNIPA and Aligning Forces Humboldt are sponsoring the film and panel discussion that follows.

The panel and audience Q&A will be led by 2013 MacArthur Fellow Dr. Jeffrey Brenner, the director of the Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers in New Jersey and a nationally-recognized innovator around redesigning health care delivery.

The panel features St. Joseph and Redwood Memorial Hospital President Dr. David O’Brien, Open Door Community Health System medical director Dr. Bill Hunter, and Pathways to Health co-founder Betsy Stapleton.

“This is not a firestorm event about beating up the panel and local providers,” DenOuden said. “We want the community to come and leave with an expanded awareness of what is going on in Humboldt County and why you have to be responsible for your own health care decisions. We are pulling back the curtain a little bit to see what’s happening here.”

“As more people become aware of what it really costs to get health care, and as they get engaged and understand what is happening, they are going to be more motivated to ask for change,” Reed said.

Reed got his first opportunity to impact local health care when he joined the year-long Surgical Rate Project. Last August, he co-presented to the Board of Supervisors a community report outlining four recommendations to deal with North Coast elective surgery rates that more than doubled the rest of the state on some elective procedures.

The project report, released last May, notes that surgical rates impact individual experience, the population’s health, and the overall cost of the health system – a cost Reed called “unsustainable.”

The Institute of Medicine says 30 percent of health care costs – roughly \$750 billion annually – are wasted and do not improve health.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development reports the average per capita cost of health care in the developed world is \$3,000 compared to about \$8,000 in the U.S.

“People in the U.S. spend less time with their doctors and locally, face long delays for appointments,” said Martin Love, chief executive officer of HDN Foundation and IPA.

“Some people get very good care, but no one thinks it’s affordable. Even the people who can bear any cost are looking to Germany, France, and England for care, not the U.S. We spend all that money, yet we’re not the world leader in quality. We’re not even close.”

Local employers such as the Blue Lake Casino are even allowing employees who wish it to get surgical treatment out of the country as a way to cut costs and improve quality.

Humboldt County, Love said, consistently ranks in the bottom five or six counties in the state for health care assessments.

“We broke out of the 50’s this year – 48th,” DenOuden interjected.

“Sometimes, innovation follows from need,” Love said. He ticked off a number of innovative projects that the health care community has collaborated on in the last decade: the health information exchange, the diabetes project, the care coordination project to address avoidable use of the emergency room by those who use it most, and the care transitions initiative that has cut hospital readmission rates.

“There’s an opportunity looming out there because something is going to happen – soon,” Love said. “Some entity is going to end up in charge of health care in Humboldt County. I don’t know if it will be Washington D.C., the county, or Orange (the main office for the St. Joseph Health System) – but if we want to have local control, we have to start working on it as a community, and that includes consumers.”

Area 1 Agency on Aging paid Carol Harrison to write this article.