



H E A L T H R I G H T S H O T L I N E
INDEPENDENT ASSISTANCE FOR HEALTH CARE CONSUMERS

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THREE-YEAR STUDY REVEALS LITTLE POSITIVE CHANGE
FOR SACRAMENTO AREA HEALTH CARE CONSUMERS

Problems unchanged, consumers are unsure where to turn, how to resolve most issues

SACRAMENTO – A report by the independent Health Rights Hotline detailing the experiences of health care consumers in the four-county Sacramento area shows that even with increased attention paid to the issue by the media and elected officials, consumer problems with the health care system remain virtually unchanged. The report covers the three-year period between 1997-2000 and analyzes data collected from 8,700 consumers who called the Hotline during that period.

The 150-page report details the types of problems consumers face, based on what kind of health coverage they have. It also makes recommendations to health plans, medical groups, policymakers and regulators on actions they can take to make the system perform more effectively for consumers. The report, *“The Impact of the Health Rights Hotline, Making a Difference for Health Care Consumers Through Direct Service, Advocacy and Systemic Change”* is the Hotline’s fourth comprehensive examination of the challenges consumers face with the health care system in the Sacramento area.

“The most troubling aspect of this report,” said John Kotick, Executive Director of the Center for Health Care Rights, one of the sponsors of the Hotline, “is that there has been very little positive change in consumers’ experience during the three years that the Hotline has been tracking these issues. It clearly points to the need to continue monitoring consumers’ concerns, and to track the effect of HMO reform legislation to bring about systemic change.”

The report shows that denials of care, inappropriate care and customer service issues continue to be the areas with which consumers experience the greatest degree of problems, according to Hotline Program Director, Shelley Rouillard. The problems experienced by Hotline callers are similar to those reported by respondents to a random survey conducted just before the Hotline began.

The report also points out that, overall, Medicare HMO members report problems at six times the rate of consumers in commercial HMOs and three times the rate of those in Medi-Cal HMOs. The report includes an in-depth comparison of the problems experienced by “aged” Medicare beneficiaries (those 65 and older) and “disabled” Medicare beneficiaries (those under age 65).

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“The state Department of Managed Health Care looked to the Health Rights Hotline as a model for our HMO Help Center,” said department Director, Daniel Zingale, who participated in the press conference to unveil the report. “The Hotline’s analysis of consumer problems is valuable in helping us better understand how to meet the needs of health care consumers statewide.”

A primary aim of the Hotline is to educate consumers about their rights and responsibilities. The report shows that nearly 20 percent of the issues raised by callers relate to education about their rights.

“Many health care consumers do not understand their rights and don’t know what to do when a problem comes up,” said Rouillard, program director. “Many people lack basic understanding about how their health plan works. Medicare beneficiaries, people who speak limited or no English, and those transitioning from employer-based coverage, find navigating the system to be especially daunting. For those populations, the Hotline provides a critical service.”

Rouillard points to the fact that, in follow-up surveys with callers, 82 percent found the Hotline to be very or somewhat helpful in resolving their problems or providing the information needed by the caller. Nearly three-quarters had their problem resolved and nearly sixty percent were satisfied with the resolution.

Recommendations regarding some of the report’s findings include:

- that the state Department of Managed Health Care conduct a random survey of health care consumers statewide to determine the types of problems consumers currently experience and to track and analyze consumers’ problems to determine the impact of HMO reform legislation;
- that consolidated oversight of all managed health care plans, including HMOs and PPOs is needed and should be located within the Department of Managed Health Care; and
- that the DMHC should set a standard for “acceptable” problem rates, evaluate the impact these problems have on consumers, and work with health care stakeholders, including consumers, to make the system more responsive to consumer concerns.

The full report, with findings, recommendations and charts, is available at www.hrh.org or by calling 916-551-2100.

The Health Rights Hotline serves consumers in Sacramento, Placer, Yolo and El Dorado Counties. It was started with grants from the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Sierra Health Foundation, and The California Wellness Foundation. Since February 2000, the Hotline has been funded primarily by The California Endowment. The Health Rights Hotline can be reached by calling 916-551-2100 or toll free at 1-888-354-4474 Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.