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Prop. 216: To protect quality

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By Kit Costello and Harvey Rosenfield

HAVE YOU noticed that all your HMO or health insurance company seems to care about these days is "cost"? Although The Bee agrees that "in many cases . . . the drive to cut soaring health costs threatens the quality of medical care," it offers no prescription of its own for the dangerous changes that HMOs and managed care companies are imposing upon us ("No on the health initiatives," editorial, Oct. 1).

Doctors and nurses are given bonuses to withhold treatment, to limit referrals to specialists and to reduce hospital admissions. Patients with serious illnesses are kicked out of the hospital whether ready or not. HMO bureaucrats override doctors' medical decisions. Nurses and other health care professionals are replaced at bedside by low-wage "care buddies," who have only minimal training. Even your confidential medical records are up for sale.

California consumers need protection against unsafe medicine. A senior citizen died after six hours in the emergency room of her HMO because she did not receive an expensive drug that ER doctors receive bonuses to ration. A boy is permanently blind and disabled because HMO doctors refused to order an $800 CAT scan that would have diagnosed an easily treatable brain infection. The bills passed by the Legislature this year are loophole-ridden diversions that will do more to protect HMOs, not patients.

Proposition 216 would put the caring back in health care. It would outlaw bonuses that force doctors and nurses to choose between their patients and the HMO. It would establish safe staffing levels in all medical facilities, and ban the use of untrained personnel for patient care. And it would require HMOs to give patients a second opinion before they can deny treatment that your doctor has ordered.

Proposition 216 would also establish a consumer watchdog group to make sure its provisions are properly implemented. It would force the industry to disclose safety studies and financial data and ban the sale of your medical records to third parties without your permission.

HMOS AND insurance companies claim that Proposition 216 would increase taxes and health premiums. Unfortunately, The Bee has bought the health businesses' baloney lock, stock and barrel. But Proposition 216 would make the HMOs and insurance companies – not taxpayers – pay for the costs of implementing the initiative, through modest fees on some of their extravagant, unnecessary expenditures.

HMOs, insurance companies and hospital chains spent $22.7 billion on mergers and acquisitions in California over the last three years; most CEOs of California HMOs are paid millions of dollars in salary and stock options every year. This is money that could go to maintain quality health care. Under Proposition 216, 1 percent to 2 percent of that money will be used to cover programs that are now being paid for by California taxpayers. And for extra protection, Proposition 216 prohibits HMOs or insurance companies from raising their premiums without full disclosure and justification.

In the long run, quality medicine saves money as well as lives. A new study by the Albert Einstein College of Medicine concludes that by protecting the quality of care patients receive, Proposition 216 could save taxpayers and businesses $7 billion in the next five years. Vote Yes on Proposition 216.

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