

Naturopaths: Oregon CCOs could shrink patient base

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Oregon's much-lauded new method of providing "coordinated care" to state health plan recipients could shut naturopathic physicians out of the system.

On Thursday, as many as 1,000 Oregon Health Plan patients who currently use naturopathic doctors as their primary care physicians will lose their coverage if they continue to see those professionals.

That's because coordinated care organizations, established by Gov. [John Kitzhaber](#)'s team as both a preemptive health care reform tool and a way to provide more cross-discipline treatments, are not credentialing naturopathic physicians as primary care providers.

Oregon has certified naturopaths as primary care professionals since 1998.

While relatively few patients will be affected when new CCO credentialing rules take effect Nov. 1, naturopathic medicine advocates fear the field will be slammed in 2014 when the state begins seeking new health coverage providers for Oregon employees. The Oregon Association of Naturopathic Physicians fears that the state will choose a coordinated care organization to oversee public employees' next plan.

With some 80,300 state employees, the group worries the move would drop that naturopaths' patient base by tens of thousands.

Some 700,000 Oregonians visit naturopathic physicians each year.

"We knew theoretically we'd run into this problem, but it's now become an emergent crisis because so many patients could lose access to their doctors," said [Laura Farr](#), executive director for the state's naturopathic association.

[Patty Wentz](#), a spokesman for the Oregon Health Authority, said the state's next request for proposal for the workers' health plans goes out in fall of 2013 for the 2015 plan year. The RFP will include specific elements of a coordinated care model.

"The CCOs could respond to that RFP (for public employees), but other types of health care groups could respond as well," said Wentz, whose group [oversees the coordinated care organization](#) program.

Farr said the issue plays into concerns that Oregon, like the rest of the nation, is losing primary care providers. The [Association of American Medical Colleges](#) projects some 63,000 primary care doctors will leave the industry by 2015.

If naturopaths disappear from the equation, it could lead to more emergency room visits and other issues, said Farr.

"They come to us for everything from pediatrics to geriatrics, for mental health and the common cold," she explained. "A lot of people come to naturopathic doctors because they've not found the care they need through their providers. If they don't trust the kind of care they get somewhere else. . . that's when they start going to the emergency room" for basic medical needs.

Farr said several coordinated care organizations, including [Health Share of Oregon](#), the state's largest, are working to find solutions to the issue.