

Naturopaths feel left out of Oregon's health reform

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Oregon's naturopathic physicians say they are being excluded from new state health reforms and their patients will suffer as a result.

Earlier this week, Laura Farr of the Oregon Association of Naturopathic Physicians delivered an online petition with more than 2,000 names to Gov. John Kitzhaber. The Oregon Health Plan's new coordinated care organizations are refusing to approve naturopathic doctors, an accompanying letter said.

"No CCO has accepted independently practicing naturopathic doctors for credentialing on their provider panels, and only a handful of naturopathic doctors have been grandfathered in," Farr wrote.

The tension goes to the heart of the state's ambitious effort to curb costs and improve care for the 600,000 members in the Oregon Health Plan. Although the old system provided more freedom to some of its low-income members, the new one is designed to rein in spending. That could mean less choice for patients and more skepticism toward practitioners

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of alternative medicine.

Before the reforms, managed care groups oversaw most Oregon Health Plan members. But Farr says they often excluded her members. Patients who preferred naturopathic physicians were part of the minority who weren't in managed care, called "open card" patients. But those patients, about 30,000 of them, will be shifted to the new care organizations starting this month.

The question is whether the care organizations shift the new patients to a different doctor. Farr says only naturopathic physicians who work in the same practice with a medical doctor are being approved by CCOs.

And some independent practitioners have been told

to not even apply. Jenny Maurer, a Sellwood naturopathic doctor, says that's what happened to her recently when she called FamilyCare, one of two Portland-area CCOs.

The state earlier assured OHP members that they would keep the same doctor under the reforms. But state officials now say some patients won't.

"The majority of them aren't going to see a change in providers, but some may," says Jeremy Vandehey of the Oregon Health Authority.

So far the state has certified 15 new care organizations under a law approved earlier this year. The law bans discrimination against credentialed providers but doesn't require the new groups to contract with anyone.

The new care groups are aware of the issue. Health Share of Oregon, a Portland-area care organization, is considering a demonstration project to see how alter-

native medicine fits in with its patient care responsibilities.

"We are in the exploration phase, and we all have a lot of learning to do about naturopathic care and how we can all serve this vulnerable population," said Janet Meyer, interim CEO of the group.

Naturopathic doctors can appeal with the state if they've been excluded, and their patients can ask to keep their old doctor, citing "continuity of care."

That's what 62-year-old Janis Emerson of Happy Valley did, and on Friday, she learned she'll be able to keep her naturopathic doctor. Six years ago the professional illustrator was T-boned by an intoxicated driver and has been dealing with chronic pain ever since. More than a year ago, she changed to a naturopathic doctor whose treatment made the pain much less.

"It has made the difference between my walking

relatively pain-free most of the time and not," she says. "That's a huge deal for me. I used to be laying on ice or heat all the time for a lumbar injury." She calls the Oregon Health Plan "a god-send."

State officials suggest the naturopathic doctors' concerns are overblown. A health authority fact sheet says the agency hasn't been notified of anyone losing access to their provider.

Naturopathic physicians say the new system risks making them second-tier providers and could increasingly restrict more patients' access to care. They cite studies that prove their effectiveness as primary care physicians. Farr notes that Kitzhaber's health reforms are all about holistic efforts and eliminating unnecessary treatment, central tenets to naturopathic physicians. The current situation "is just ironic in many ways," she says.

While the current dispute

involves several hundred patients in the OHP, in the future it could affect thousands of people, Farr notes. That's because Kitzhaber plans in future years to start shifting public school teachers and state workers to the coordinated care organizations.

Farr calls it "a tip-of-the-iceberg problem."

For now, naturopathic patients on OHP say they're worried. Laura Brinster, 58, was told she'd remain partially paralyzed after her stroke more than a decade ago. But of late, she's walking better, which she attributes to acupuncture from a naturopathic physician.

"My left foot, the cat stepped on it last night — and I felt the cat step on it," she says. "I haven't felt anything in that foot in 10 years."

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