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Contact: Jeff Stensland
(803) 898-2584

SC Medicaid Program Promotes Medical Homes

COLUMBIA, S.C.--South Carolina Medicaid is changing for the better. More and more beneficiaries are choosing to enroll in a coordinated care health plan rather than stay in the traditional "Fee-for-Service" Medicaid model. Health plans offer beneficiaries a closer relationship with a medical home, enhanced benefits and incentives to stay healthy.

The program is called Healthy Connections Choices and is designed to get a better return on South Carolina's health care investment by improving the health and well-being of Medicaid beneficiaries. Sponsored by the SC Department of Health and Human Services, (SCDHHS) the program works with managed care organizations, medical homes networks and special enrollment counselors who guide recipients through the choice process.

Dr. Weave Whitehead, a Florence-based pediatrician, said Healthy Connections Choices can greatly improve the health of his Medicaid patients.

"The end purpose of every child having a medical home is better, more efficient health care," Dr. Whitehead said. "As partners in a patient's health care, we need to be proactive. At the same time the patient has a responsibility to understand they have a health partner and to use that partner appropriately."

How is Healthy Connections Choices different? Under traditional Fee-for-Service Medicaid, beneficiaries must navigate the healthcare system on their own, often receiving sporadic care and never establishing crucial relationships with a primary care doctor. Those who choose to enroll in a coordinated care plan offered through Healthy Connections Choices have a doctor who ensures they get the care they need. In addition to having access to the same benefits as Fee-for-Service enrollees, those enrolled in Healthy Connections Choices are also eligible for special rewards for healthy behaviors and enhanced benefits such as eyeglasses and dental care for adults, smoking cessation classes and programs tailored to special diseases such as asthma and diabetes.

"Where the (Fee-for-Service) system breaks down is when a patient uses the emergency room or urgent care for colds, diaper rash or other non-emergency health problems. This is also the most costly use of (the) limited health care dollar," Dr. Whitehead said. "Doctors have to educate patients about the medical home concept, and this is something we aren't doing enough. All children need a medical home with a doctor who knows the child and their family...someone to be an advocate for them when it comes to their health care."

How does Healthy Connections Choices work? New Medicaid members will get an enrollment packet in the mail that explains the program and details their health plan choices. Every

beneficiary will have several plans to choose from. They can call an independent enrollment counselor who will help them choose a plan that's right for them and their families.

All other eligible Medicaid members can enroll in a health plan at any time or at their renewal date. All members have at least 30 days (from the day the enrollment packet is mailed) to choose a health plan or choose to stay in Fee-for-Service Medicaid. If they fail to choose a plan or choose to stay in Fee-for-Service Medicaid, they will be assigned to a plan. Anyone unhappy with their plan selection has 90 days to choose another option.

To avoid unwanted assignments, SCDHHS strongly encourages beneficiaries to read their enrollment packet, which is emblazoned with the phrase "Open it, Read it, Respond to it!" Dr. Whitehead also urges providers to help educate their Medicaid patients about the health plans they work with and share materials with patients.

"It's a cultural change—and will take time— but it's the right way to go," he said. "It is up to the patient or parent to be informed and to pay attention to their Medicaid options. If you want to keep the doctor you are seeing now then you have to ask about your options for health care coverage."

SCDHHS Director Emma Forkner says the changes occurring in Medicaid will provide lasting benefits to the entire state. "Choosing the health plan that offers the right combination of delivery services for the individual or family is a significant step for the Medicaid population," Forkner said. "We anticipate many of our beneficiaries will learn to manage chronic diseases and adopt healthy behaviors and lifestyles. Our goal is a healthier Medicaid population for South Carolina."

For more information on SC Healthy Connections Choices call free 1-877-552-4642 or visit the website at www.SCchoices.com.