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The price is right here

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As consumers, every day we are faced with a dizzying array of choices. Which big screen television should I buy? Which fancy coffee drink should I have this morning? What unique and specialized options would I like on my new vehicle?

In each of these cases, before making a purchase, a consumer can find out all kinds of information about the product—the cost, quality, nutritional value, longevity, crash-test rating and so on.

Sooner or later, we will all be faced with a far more crucial decision that could have life-and-death consequences: What physician should I choose or what hospital should I go to for my healthcare? And, sadly, you will be able to find precious little information to help you make that decision. That's just not right.

At Alegen Health we believe it's time that healthcare providers offer consumers relevant, timely and meaningful information about the cost and quality of healthcare so they can make informed decisions. We also believe that people have a right to access care in more-convenient settings, and that with the right incentives, people will become more engaged in their health and their healthcare decisions.

Ultimately, more engaged consumers will result in higher quality care, lower costs and, we believe, better health.

We're working on all of these things, but our most recent innovation is a patent-pending, online tool called [My Cost](#), which provides consumers with information on projected costs they will incur for nearly 500 common treatments and procedures, along with their out-of-pocket responsibility. The system, created with the goal of putting consumers at the center of the healthcare equation, takes into account an individual's insurance plan and personal coverage choices.

My Cost also provides cost information for those without insurance, including information about our financial assistance programs.

My Cost represents an integral part of Alegen's commitment to patient-centered care; the tool was more than a year in development to ensure it would truly address consumers' needs for relevant cost information. So far, the response from consumers has been incredible, with close to 15,000 cost estimates calculated since we launched the tool in late January.

We've received multiple comments from users applauding our efforts at providing a "much-needed service." One such comment came from a hospital in Illinois

stating, "What a wonderful idea to have a tool for patients to shop around." Several comments have also come from uninsured patients pleased that they are able to budget for expected services.

While we're not the first in the nation to address the need for greater transparency in healthcare pricing, we believe our system represents an important innovation for the industry because it takes an important step in completing the healthcare value equation with personally relevant information: your actual cost+quality=value. Since the fall of 2005, we have been reporting quality scores, which include benchmarks with other regional providers and national peer groups so that consumers can better understand the value of the care they choose. By providing information about price, quality, and—ultimately—value, it's our goal to empower consumers to make better healthcare decisions.

And we must offer more-convenient and cost-effective access to care. We have opened three Quick Care clinics inside Hy-Vee grocery stores in the Omaha, Neb., metro area. Designed to diagnose and treat everyday illnesses, these clinics post prices ranging from \$25 to \$65 and accept only cash, although we give patients the paperwork to file with their insurance company if they so choose.

As a not-for-profit, faith-based provider, our mission at Alegant Health involves helping our patients, their families and the people in our communities take better charge of their health. That includes seeing the best doctors and getting the best healthcare quality and value.

But without convenient access to both quality and cost information, we recognize this cannot be achieved. As we know from various quality comparisons, not all healthcare is created equal, and the quality of care can influence not only the health outcomes for an individual patient, but also the cost of care as well.

Multiplied by the millions of consumers who interact with the nation's healthcare system each day, it's clear that the choices of individuals can have a dramatic impact.

From our vantage point, the best place for this change to occur is from within the healthcare industry. We should not wait for the government to dictate how we can better inform and engage consumers. Instead, we in the industry should lead the revolution and embrace consumerism and its requirement to provide timely, relevant and meaningful information to the people we serve.

When consumers are given good choices and solid information about cost and quality, we believe they'll make decisions that benefit not only themselves and their families, but also the economy as a whole—and not just when purchasing big-screen TVs. We hope that the My Cost effort in Nebraska will encourage

others to continue moving the healthcare industry's horizons forward as we all work to achieve the next generation in healthcare.