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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

JULY 28, 2009

Cutting Repeat Hospital Trips -- Simple Idea, Hard to Pull Off

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PITTSFIELD, Mass. -- One prescription for slashing billions of dollars from America's health-care spending will come down to questions like this: Can hospitals persuade discharged patients such as Betty Beauchaine to pass up a Fourth of July hot dog?

Mrs. Beauchaine, a 75-year-old great-grandmother who suffers from heart failure, was admitted to the Berkshire Medical Center here twice in June, with fluid accumulation in her lungs that left her short of breath.

Berkshire Medical has launched an unusual initiative in recent years to prevent heart-failure patients like Ms. Beauchaine from ending up back in the hospital shortly after they have been discharged. As part of its efforts, it recently advised patients not to eat franks at holiday cookouts because their salt content could promote dangerous fluid retention.

Mrs. Beauchaine recalls approaching the food table at an Independence Day picnic: "I told the girl, 'I'm going to have a hot dog. If I'm dead in the morning, I'll never know.'" In the morning she was back at Berkshire Medical Center.

The government spends an estimated \$12 billion a year on "potentially preventable" readmissions for Medicare patients, according to the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission, an independent congressional agency. U.S. leaders are trying to reduce such costs as they wrangle this week over how to retool the country's health-care system. Though private insurers also pay for readmissions, these charges are especially prevalent among the elderly covered by Medicare.

"Medicare has been paying for quantity and not for quality," says Barry Straube, Medicare's chief medical officer. "The goal is to not pay for things that shouldn't happen."

Lawmakers agree on the need to drive down readmissions, but not on how to do it. Efforts like those at Berkshire Medical require hospitals to become deeply involved in the lives of their sickest patients after they leave the building. Some patients aren't always willing, or able, to heed hospitals' advice. The biggest sticking point may be this: It isn't in these institutions' financial interest to keep people from coming back.

Some lawmakers want the government to help fund services like those provided by Berkshire Medical. A bill introduced earlier this year by Colorado Sen. Michael Bennet, a Democrat, would