

Health Department offering Wall Street-style bonuses to doctors who improve patients' health

March 9th 2009

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Daily News City Hall Bureau

Despite the gloomy economy, the city Health Department is offering Wall Street-style bonuses to doctors who boost their patients' health by the end of the year.

Under a privately-funded pilot program, more than 50 medical practices can earn up to \$100,000 for improving the heart health of poor patients, health officials told the Daily News.

With \$4 million from the Robin Hood Foundation, the agency will monitor approximately 472 doctors at 107 practices that use electronic health records.

Half will qualify for the cash incentives.

"Our hope is that we will be able to continue this, and if we can show good results we can extend it to everybody," said Farzad Mostashari, who is overseeing the project at the Health Department.

Some anti-poverty advocates question the timing of the bonuses, saying there are better ways to help needy New Yorkers during desperate times.

"We are in a crisis and we should deal with the crisis of getting Medicaid and health insurance for the poor," said Community Service Society President David Jones.

"I think this is a great idea," Jones added. "I just don't think now is the time."

The Health Department sliced nearly 10% off this year's budget and an additional 19% off next year's spending, and took heat for closing 44 free dental clinics this spring.

The Robin Hood funding is tied to the experimental program and can't be used to plug other budget holes.

Under the nine-month trial, doctors can earn up to \$200 a patient for reducing their blood pressure and cholesterol levels, enrolling patients in quit-smoking programs and asking them to take aspirin daily.

Each doctor can earn up to \$20,000, and the ceiling for a practice is \$100,000.

The extra money is collected for making strides with those who are uninsured, on Medicaid or diabetic.

Dr. Olusanya Rufai, who applied for the program and has a practice in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, said he's motivated by the competition, not the cash.

"It's almost like a grade, and I'd really like to know how well I'm doing," he said.

Dr. Michele Reed of Queens said any money she gets will go back into maintaining the costly electronic records.

The goal of the bonus program, called eHearts, is to reduce rates of heart disease, as it is the most deadly killer in the city, claiming 21,000 lives in 2007.

Officials also hope to save money with the pilot program through fewer emergency room visits but don't count that as a priority.

Said Mostashari: "This was more about saving lives than saving money."

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