

GUEST COLUMN

Hospitals can manage data best

By Steve Brenton

In response to Thursday's guest column titled "Veto plan to privatize hospital data": The authors, Barbara Rudolph and Robert Newsom, make several puzzling, misleading and unfounded claims about the proposal to privatize hospital data collection.

The authors claim privatization will "dismantle" the 12-year-old state hospital data program. Nonsense. The proposal retains all the existing hospital data reporting and dissemination mandates and will actually expand data collection. The proposal will also require Wisconsin Hospital Association to give the data, which hospitals and others currently pay for, to state and local government agencies at no charge. The authors claim that 30 percent of Wisconsin hospitals do not belong to WHA and do not support privatization. This is simply ridiculous. Ninety-six percent of all Wisconsin hospitals are members of WHA, and are unified in their frustration with the state's performance and unrealized potential of privatization.

The authors charge that the data will now become inaccurate, unreliable, and subject to manipulation. I suggest the authors read the proposal, which will subject WHA to far more accountability and oversight than the current program has ever had — a program that has never been audited and is well known to use hospital assessment revenue (\$1.3 million a year) to fund other, unrelated activities.

In truth, the privatization proposal removes data collection from a bureaucracy that long ago lost sight of the data's original purpose — to foster better health care purchasing decisions and competition among providers. This important information on price and utilization stagnates and gather dust in a bloated operation that is chronically behind schedule.

The authors claim the Hospital Association will demand "prohibitive fees" for the data. Again, a cursory review of the proposal would show that an independent accountability board, chaired by the Secretary of the Department of Health and Family Services, must approve fees charged for data.

According to the authors, the value of this data comes when the government links it with other personal information such as birth and death records, as well as information about visits to your doctor's office. Under the privatization proposal, the WHA will give the hospital data to the state for no charge and they will be able share with other government agencies, including public health organizations.

WHA's commitment to open data collection and data sharing is well known and is supported by employers, government agencies and legislators of both parties. WHA has stepped up to the plate and initiated a bold new hospital quality reporting system.

We believe that timely, open and publicly available information, not inflexible bureaucracies, will improve health care delivery and the health care marketplace.

Legislators and the governor want innovation and efficiency from government. The time has come to privatize hospital data collection, and the Wisconsin Hospital Association will provide more data in a more timely fashion with the highest level of public accountability.

Brenton is president of the Wisconsin Hospital Association.