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National research eyes local health care

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Tallahassee has been mentioned yet again in a national assessment of communities' efforts to provide effective health care at lower cost.

Four researchers who scanned the country looking for models of success included Tallahassee on their list and wrote about their work in a recent *New York Times* opinion piece.

"If the rest of America could achieve the performances of regions like these, our health-care cost crisis would be over," they wrote.

The team searched among the country's 306 "hospital referral regions" or groups of service areas for positive signs. Specifically they looked for regions with per-capita Medicare costs that are markedly low or declining in rank, and where federal measures of quality in health-care delivery are above average. That reduced the list to 74 regions.

Last month, health-care professionals and executives from Tallahassee were among the representatives from 10 of the regions invited to Washington, D.C., to tell their stories.

Dr. Mark McClellan, director of the Engelberg Center for Health Care Reform at the Brookings Institution and one of the four researchers, attributed Tallahassee's accomplishments in part to the community's commitment to health.

"It's really not just the hospitals. It's the interaction on care in the whole Tallahassee community," McClellan said, citing such attributes as a strong commitment to primary care, community-based service, disease prevention, and the involvement of providers at all levels.

"The other thing that seemed impressive is how much Tallahassee has improved over time," he added.

President Obama mentioned the same thing June 15 in his speech to the American Medical Association in Chicago. He cited Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare in noting health-care procedures and practices that work.

Dr. Donald Berwick, president of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement in Cambridge, Mass., and one of the researchers, said the rate of improvement was notable as well.

"What you have in Tallahassee is a very low-cost area in the state, which is a high-cost state. And their rate of improvement is the highest of any area in the country," he said.

Dr. Alma Littles, senior associate dean for medical education and academic affairs at the FSU College of Medicine, made the trip to Washington from Tallahassee.

A big part in the effort to make gains in patient care is cooperation between the primary-care physicians, the specialists and the hospital community.

"Tallahassee is a close-knit medical community and focused on meeting the primary-care needs of the patients," she said.
