

# Unison Launches Gold Star Program to Honor Physician Excellence

BY NANCY KENNEDY

An innovative program developed by Unison Health Plan to honor and reward primary care physicians who offer exceptional quality of care to participating Medicare, Medicaid and CHIP consumers will be launched in April with special events at Nemacon Woodlands and the Hershey Lodge. The new Gold Star Program, conceived by Unison Medical Director Joseph Sheridan, D.O., is a means of expressing gratitude for the diligence, commitment and excellence of over 100 family practice, internal medicine and pediatric physicians who have excelled in delivering high quality, cost effective care to Unison customers, based on selected quality and performance measures.

"The Gold Star Program is Unison's way of recognizing these outstanding providers who give service that exceeds the standard in many ways," says Sheridan. "We want the health care industry and the public in Pennsylvania to know that there are significant numbers of doctors who work very hard, using their resources, skills and energy to care for our members. Our goal with the Gold Star Program is to identify them, honor them, make them feel appreciated and reward them by making their jobs easier."

"As a practicing physician myself, I know how hard they work. I was reimbursed by the payors, but rarely received personal acknowledgement or thanks. Doctors are human beings and like anyone else, they need and deserve to feel appreciated."



Dr. Joseph Sheridan



Jennifer Kessler

Unison Health Plan operates public sector health plans for persons who are enrolled in Medicare and Medicaid in Pennsylvania, Ohio, New Jersey, Tennessee and South Carolina. Unison clients are low-income persons that have been traditionally underserved by the health care system, with limited access to care and an absence of preventive care. Many have medically complex conditions and multiple diagnoses that are impacted by social and economic issues. Their care and medical management, says Sheridan, require a comprehensive, anticipatory approach that can be challenging for providers.

"Our Gold Star physicians are on call 24/7. They go above and beyond the norm in meeting the needs of the patients and their commitment produces positive health care outcomes. They provide care that is preventive and cost effective, and our members are very satisfied. One of the goals of this new program is to help make the care of this population less complex for the physicians, by reducing some of the administrative burden for Gold Star physicians so that they can focus on the care," Sheridan says.

Among the benefits for Gold Star physicians is the elimination of the majority of standard prior-authorization processes and the complete elimination of paper referrals. Sheridan explains that the decision to significantly modify the traditional referral system originated with a phone call from a provider. "A physician called me and said, 'You and I have worked together for five years and I have not had a single denial. So what do I have to keep calling to get approval?' It made sense; she had definitely proven herself, as have so many others. A health plan without prior authorization is unheard of, but this is something that we believe these providers have earned. Eliminating referrals will ease their workload."

The physicians who receive Gold Star designation will be notified in March. Those who practice in Western Pennsylvania will be recognized at an awards dinner at Nemacon, while those in the eastern half of the state will be honored at the Hershey Lodge. The Gold Star credential will be noted on the membership cards of Unison customers who receive care from those physicians.

"We believe that it's important for our clients to know that they are receiving care from dedicated, quality physicians and that Unison thinks so highly of them," says Sheridan. "The message to the clients is 'You are receiving care from a top-notch doctor.' Our hope is that other members will want to see these doctors, too; we plan

to make the Gold Star program known to our clients through our newsletter, ads and mailings."

The physicians that earned the Gold Star designation met or exceeded specific quality measurements for preventive care. The indicators are practice-specific and included completion of EPSDT examinations for children under the age of two; completion of immunizations by age 2; completion of anemia screenings in children under twelve months of age; Pap smear screenings; mammogram screenings; cholesterol screenings and completion of pneumococcal vaccinations in adults. Providers had to exceed the 75th percentile in relation to their Unison peer group and could not be below the 25th percentile for any indicator. In addition, Gold Star doctors must serve a critical number of Unison members and be willing to serve additional Unison clients.

Unison Health Plan is one of the nation's highest ranked health plans. It has received the highest possible accreditation status from the National Care and Quality Assurance (NCQA) agency and was named by the NCQA/US News and World Report America's Best Health Plans report in 2005. Unison promotes access to preventive and comprehensive health care services for Medicare and Medicaid recipients who might otherwise rely on emergency room care. Unison began in Pennsylvania in 1996 and was restructured in 1999 to allow for expansion to other states. The company is distinguished by its collaborative relationships with community and government agencies, creative use of resources and cost effectiveness.

Pennsylvania is the first state among Unison affiliates to offer the program, which will be expanded to the other states, according to Jennifer Kessler, plan president for Unison Health Plan of Pennsylvania. "We've had an outstanding response from the doctors in Pennsylvania," she says. "Our primary goal is a program that works for the doctors and is attractive to them so that they will want to see our members. Ultimately, we want each of our members to find a medical home with the right provider. We have so much respect for the doctors; we want to simplify things for them and be easy to work with."

"Our doctors are simply great. They take great care of our patients. We want them to know that we recognize this, and we want the world to know, too."

For more information about Unison Health Plan or the Gold Star Program, contact Dr. Joseph Sheridan at [joseph.sheridan@unisonhealthplan.com](mailto:joseph.sheridan@unisonhealthplan.com).