PHC4 wants to help you be a smarter health-care shopper

Pennsylvania residents have a new tool to help them become better shoppers for health-care services.

The Pennsylvania Health Care Cost Containment Council (PHC4) on Tuesday launched an updated version of its interactive database of Medicare payments for common outpatient treatments.

The database, which uses Medicare figures from 2011, provides consumers with the amount Medicare pays hospital outpatient departments and free-standing outpatient centers for 78 common services, treatments and procedures such as colonoscopies, cataract surgeries and MRIs. The online service is searchable for all 67 Pennsylvania counties.

(In case you are interested, Medicare paid $399 for a colon scope in Montgomery County and $392 for a colon scope in Philadelphia — when the procedure was done at an ambulatory surgery center. Medicare paid the same amount in both counties, $673, when the procedure was done at a hospital outpatient department.)

"Knowing where to begin negotiating fees for health care can be useful in reducing costs, particularly for people in a consumer-driven health plan with a health savings account, or those who are uninsured," said Joe Martin, PHC4's executive director.

"For those paying out of pocket for many outpatient services, knowing what Medicare pays gives people a reference point in negotiating for a better price."

You can check out the database here.

PHC4 is an independent state agency, based in Harrisburg, with the responsibility to collect, analyze and make available to the public data about the cost and quality of health care in Pennsylvania.