

Insurance mergers will hurt your health care

Some of us remember when there was only one Telephone Company. It was AT&T and they ruled the market. Their stock ticker symbol was simply "T" (telephone) and we all just referred to them as "the Phone Company," or "Ma Bell." It was a legal monopoly, and they had no competition. Later, the government broke them up, and now we have many such companies, healthy competition, and reasonable rates for the services provided. Competing companies have to be efficient and try to please their customers. In our market system, this is fair and leads to good values for consumers, while still allowing good companies to thrive and succeed.

Those with health insurance currently have some choice and can "shop around" to find reasonable premiums, fair deductibles, and a decent plan to fit their budget. However, if four of the biggest health insurance companies in Georgia have their way, this choice you now have may become a thing of the past. Keep in mind that health insurance companies have posted record profits in recent years, and now have great influence on every aspect of patient care. Want to know how much? Ask your doctor.

At present, Aetna and Humana are considering a merger, and also Anthem and Cigna. If these mergers are approved and allowed to take place, it will represent a "big four" becoming a huge "big two." The resulting two companies will control nearly 90% of the individual market in the State of Georgia.

The insurance companies say that if allowed to merge, they will find efficiencies in the markets and pass on savings to consumers in the forms of reduced premiums. However, given what we have seen in the past two or three years with rising premiums and deductibles every year, this is hard to believe. It is not uncommon now for people who "thought" they were getting a good deal and low premiums, to find out they have a \$3000 deductible. This is the same as saying that you have no insurance until you have spent this amount of money. This will get worse if the mergers take place.

The Medical Association of Georgia (MAG), which represents over 7,000 physicians in the State, is very opposed to these mergers, because they feel these huge "merged" conglomerates will use their power to control the market in their favor. They already tell your doctor what can be done, what is allowed, and how much they will pay – take it or leave it if you want to be in their "network." If they gain even more power, this situation will worsen, and they will narrow their networks even further, such that your current provider may no longer be in your network. MAG is asking the Georgia Department of Insurance, and the U. S. Department of Justice to review these proposed mergers as they violate basic laws of fairness and competition.

What can you do? If you oppose these mergers, send an email to the State Insurance Department at mergercomments@oci.ga.gov – and tell them so. These mergers will not be good for you or your doctor. They will only be good for the insurance companies - who have it pretty good already.