

OUR OPINION

Florida Should Be Innovative In Setting Medicaid Drug Rule

To help contain the exploding cost of Medicaid, lawmakers are allowing the state Agency for Health Care Administration to limit the number of drugs used to treat mentally ill patients — a dangerous approach.

If doctors cannot prescribe the drugs they deem best, the mentally ill could land in the hospital, lose their jobs and become an even bigger drain on government services.

ACHA has a clear choice. It can be collaborative and innovative and allow access to the medications while uncovering new ways to control costs, or it can revert to antiquated strategies, like a restrictive formulary, that could cost more in the long run.

ACHA should follow the lead of the Florida Behavioral Health Collaborative, managed by The Louis De La Parte Florida Mental Health Institute at the University of South Florida. Lawmakers last year charged the collaborative with finding ways to control the growing costs for mental health drugs while ensuring continued access for Medicaid patients.

Florida is the first state to push a collaboration between pharmaceutical and managed care companies, physicians, academics and patients. In just a few

months' time, it has implemented guidelines on how best to use the drugs for Medicaid beneficiaries, saving the state some \$34 million.

Because the collaborative is relatively new, it is not clear how those savings were achieved. What is clear is that the cost of treating mental illness is declining as best practices are adopted. Credit should go to the interested parties who brought different strategies to the table. They have created a momentum that should not be stilled.

"We have a chance to really help other states, other governors, other legislatures," said Naakesh A. Dewan, a psychiatrist and president of the Center for Mental Healthcare Improvement in Clearwater.

The effort depends on access to the right drugs. Best practices won't matter if patients can't get the help they need. If old, purely cost-driven strategies are embraced, old mistakes will be borne out.

Gov. Jeb Bush has spent the last seven years encouraging innovation in all manner of state affairs. The collaborative has shown early success. ACHA should embrace the effort.