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Hearing planned for claims feud

By Frank Turco
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A feud between Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Arizona and the Chiropractic Association of Arizona over claims limitations imposed by the insurance company apparently will be settled by the state Department of Insurance.

Director Vernon Pierson said Monday that he has agreed to an agency hearing to determine whether the company has a right to set lower limits for patients treated by chiropractors than it does for those treated by physicians or physical therapists.

The hearing was sought by the association, which claims the insurance company is violating a state law that requires equal payment for medical services regardless of the provider.

"We need to determine the meaning of the law and what the word 'services' really means so we know how to handle this," Pierson said.

The hearing tentatively has been set for May 5, according to Sara Begley, the agency's chief hearing officer.

At issue is a limit of \$250 per patient per year that Blue Cross and Blue Shield began imposing on its clients last year for chiropractic care, including examinations, X-rays and treatments. Previously, the insurance company paid up to 80 percent of a chiropractor's bill for covered services.

The chiropractic association claims the limit is discriminatory and violates the law because Blue Cross and Blue Shield has much higher limits for people who receive care from physicians or physical therapists.

"What they are doing is wrong and illegal," said Alan M. Immerman, an association spokesman and a Phoenix chiropractor who has been campaigning for a hearing on the issue.

Blue Cross and Blue Shield has denied any wrongdoing, maintaining, instead, that the claims limit is directed at manipulative services and not chiropractors specifically, according to Warren Goodrich, vice president of corporate communications.

However, Goodrich acknowledged that chiropractors probably are affected more than other medical providers because their state license is limited to manipulation.

Immerman said that under the Blue Cross and Blue Shield policy, a person with lower back pain who seeks care from a chiropractor could claim only \$250 a year, which would cover an initial examination, a set of X-rays and possibly three treatments.

If the same patient sought treatment from a medical doctor or a physical therapist, he said, the insurance company would pay for as many as 40 treatments, possibly costing as much as \$2,000.

Blue Cross and Blue Shield claimed the association is waging a media campaign in an effort to force the company to change its policy.

Company spokeswoman Robin Steckler said Blue Cross and Blue Shield has an obligation to keep down health costs and the limit on chiropractic services is just one of several cost-containment measures initiated by the company.