

Infectious cut: To do the job, health agencies need independence

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Sometimes there are more important things than saving money. Pennsylvania government should be concerned about independence and performance, too.

Yet Gov. Tom Corbett has proposed, as part of his budget plan, to fold two key health care monitoring agencies into the state Department of Health. That might sound logical, but it threatens to compromise their public missions and make them subject to political influence.

The organizations at risk are the Patient Safety Authority and the Pennsylvania Health Care Cost Containment Council. The first collects reports of medical errors and near errors in an attempt to prevent mistakes in the future. The second digests cost and quality statistics from hospitals for the purpose also of improving future performance.

Such data collection and analysis could certainly be done if the units were part of the health department, but the loss of autonomy could lead to skewed results and recommendations, thereby undercutting the agencies' benefit to the health care-consuming public.

Meanwhile, the savings in the state budget would be nominal. The cost containment council gets only \$2.6 million from the state each year and already has seen its appropriations cut by half in the last four years. The safety authority is funded by \$5.9 million in assessments charged to hospitals and relies on the state to cover only some administrative costs, like payroll and pension, for its 14-member staff.

Safe and cost-effective health care is a priority for every Pennsylvanian. Independent outside monitoring improves service delivery for hospitals, medical professionals and their patients. It would be foolish, and probably unhealthy, to short-circuit the Patient Safety Authority and the Health Care Cost Containment Council for the sake of a few dollars.

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