



HAVE HOOPS, WILL TRAVEL

Jason Rowe goes globe-trotting with the game he loves.

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THREE'S COMPANY...

...and four is, too, when the triplets and quadruplets convention comes to town. Page C1

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OPINION

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Certification war hurts public

Health insurers' defections from board threaten a consumer watchdog coalition

For several years, the Niagara Health Quality Coalition has been a God-send to Western New Yorkers interested in evaluating the medical care provided by the region's hospitals. Its reports on mortality rates, patient satisfaction and other measurements have set a national standard.

Now, though, the coalition's prominent role here is being threatened. What is more, for a development with so much potential to hurt the cause of health care here, the process by which the coalition's potential decertification is proceeding appears to be arbitrary and ill-considered.

The problem, in a nutshell, is this: Earlier this year, the NHQC was named a regional "chartered value exchange," a federally designated, community-based collaborative charged with monitoring, and thus improving, regional health care. The exchanges are required to have multiple stakeholders, particularly providers, employers, consumer groups and insurers.

For reasons that remain unclear, the three regional health insurers — Independent Health, Univera and Blue Cross Blue Shield — have bolted from the NHQC's board, and with that loss of membership, the coalition is automatically threatened with loss of its federal designation.

Dr. Michael Cropp, president of Independent Health, says his company left the coalition board because the NHQC committed something approaching "fraud" in the group's application to become a chartered value exchange.

Coalition President Bruce Boissonnault counters that no such thing occurred and, to back up his argument, points to a letter from an official at General Motors, one of the coalition's stakeholders. The letter, from Marsha Manning, bemoans the argument between the two organizations and states: "I have read the CVE [chartered value exchange] pro-

posal written by NHQC, and I do not see anything in its content that in any way commits the health plans to actions related to the CVE, or any way provides additional support for the CVE application beyond the fact that there are health plans on the NHQC board."

Instead, Boissonnault says, the real reason the insurers dropped out was to decertify the coalition and provide the federal designation to an alternative group that Cropp backs and helped to create: the P2 Collaborative of Western New York.

The cost, Boissonnault says, will be diminished public confidence in the kind of reporting done on hospital care in Western New York. He cites two reasons, both of them plausible. One, if the designation goes to the P2 Collaborative, it will be in the hands of a group formed by insurers, a party that has an interest in influencing decisions about such information, rather than an independent organization like the coalition.

Second, because keeping the federal designation requires keeping the four major stakeholder groups on the board, the insurers have disproportionate power to upend the process; there were only three of them on the board, compared to 24 private employers, nine consumer organizations and seven health care providers. With their departure, Boissonnault says, they have been able to threaten NHQC's designation.

This is a truly regrettable situation for Western New York. Residents have had good reason to value the work of the Niagara Health Quality Coalition and, as the GM official suggested, that has nothing to do with the abilities of the P2 Collaborative: "There is plenty of work to go around," the letter read. "I urge you to find a way to work through these issues to provide value to your members and the residents of WNY."

Amen to that — and to a vastly more deliberative process before the federal government can decertify any such agency.