Health care is changing. Just catch the news most days – online or on TV – and you’ll find stories about trends, treatments, innovations, costs and complaints. You’ll be bombarded with information about health care today. But even with all this news, it isn’t always easy to learn how – or even if – the changes will affect us personally.

The Changing Face of Health Care series is designed to help UniCare members make sense of what’s going on. We think the more you know, the easier it will be to make health care decisions for yourself and for your family.

To understand something about how health care is changing, it helps to get familiar with a few key ideas… starting, not surprisingly, with health care reform.

Health care reform – what it means

Our health care system is complicated, and making it better is a huge challenge. There’s a name for this challenge, of course: health care reform.

Health care reform means a great many things. It applies to efforts all over the United States to find ways both to slow rising costs and improve overall quality. The federal Affordable Care Act (you may know it as Obamacare) is health care reform. So is Chapter 224, passed by the Massachusetts Legislature in 2012, and designed to improve health care quality and control health care costs.

But health care reform is much more than just governmental action. It’s also about providers and insurers looking for better ways to pay for health care. It’s about health care professionals trying to become more efficient, and trying to provide more patient-centered care.
And, health care reform is about consumers who, in the words of GIC Executive Director Dolores L. Mitchell, “become pushy patients” – consumers who ask questions about the care they get. Questions like, “Do I really need to have this test? Would it make sense to first watch and wait?”

Health care reform involves all of us. Every group, and every person, looking for ways to improve our health care system.

Rising costs – rethinking how doctors get paid

There are many reasons why health care costs keep rising, but one key factor is how providers get paid.

The way providers are usually paid is called fee-for-service. A doctor performs a service – a test, for example, or a colonoscopy – and gets paid for that service. The more services the doctor does, the more he or she gets paid. Fee-for-service rewards quantity rather than quality.

Today, providers and insurers are setting up value-based payment arrangements. Value-based arrangements tie payments to care quality and outcomes. Simply put, the emphasis is on quality before quantity.

Delivering care – making it all about the patients

These new payment arrangements are usually based on three simple ideas:

- It’s a team effort – With health care becoming more and more complex, doctors need the support of other health care team members to make sure their patients get the right care.

- It’s about health, not illness – Good health care strives to keep people well, not just tending to them when they’re sick.

- It’s about the patient – Patient-centered care relies on open communications between primary care providers (PCPs) and their patients. Patients become more active in their own health care decisions, and PCPs can better help their patients deal with the complexities of the health care system. Patients get the care they need, when and where they need it.

It won’t happen overnight

These reform efforts are only starting to take shape. You aren’t likely to notice much change when you see your doctor this week, or even this year. But, over time, health care reform – the changing face of health care – is likely to touch every part of America’s health care system.

It’s our hope that the Changing Face of Health Care series can help clarify what’s happening, without any hoopla and hollering. Because when it all makes some sense, it’s surprisingly easy to be optimistic.

UniCare’s Changing Face of Health Care is an ongoing series that looks at trends and transformations taking place in health care today. Watch for articles in the mail and at unicarestateplan.com.