Online clinic, virtuwell.com, delivers average savings of $88 per episode according to new HealthPartners report

Peer-reviewed study of HealthPartners’ virtuwell online clinic reports strong indicators of clinical effectiveness; 98 percent “would recommend” ratings from customers

SAINT PAUL, Minn. – February 5, 2013 — After tens of thousands of cases of patients using virtuwell.com, newly published research has revealed an average savings of $88 per episode for care delivered by virtuwell — plus good evidence that the care was clinically effective, and that 98 percent of customers were willing to recommend the 24/7 online clinic.

The findings were released yesterday in a study published in the February 2013 issue of Health Affairs, a leading, peer-reviewed journal of health policy thought and research.

Analyzing medical and pharmacy claims data, researchers compared thousands of episodes of care delivered online via virtuwell with those in traditional settings. Measured costs included total insurer and customer payments for full episodes of illness, as well as pharmacy costs. The analysis showed an average cost-per-episode savings in virtuwell-treated cases of $88.03. Treatment costs for three common conditions (sinus infection, urinary tract infection and pink eye) averaged:

- $20-$30 less than convenience clinics,
- $80-$142 less than office visits,
- $82-$124 less than urgent care visits,
- and $159-$469 less than emergency department visits.

The study also reports indications of strong compliance with antibiotic prescribing guidelines, a 98 percent “would recommend” rating from customers, and an average, self-reported time savings of 2.5 hours from those using the service.

Referencing the report’s findings as an example of the promise of online care innovation, the authors suggest a need for regulatory reform to enable further advancements in quality, patient experience and affordability.

“Thoughtful, well-designed online care can save costs and increase access to care, but it must never be at the expense of safety, effectiveness or a great customer experience,” said Patrick Courneya, MD, lead author of the study, a family physician and HealthPartners health plan medical director. “By reporting these findings, we hope to contribute to the further development of effective, accessible and affordable health care solutions that our nation so badly needs.”

The study will be presented tomorrow at a Health Affairs briefing in Washington, DC. Full text of the study may be accessed at healthpartners.com/healthaffairs.

Launched in late 2010, virtuwell.com offers 24/7 online diagnosis and treatment by nurse practitioners (and prescriptions if needed) for about 40 routine conditions that can be treated safely and effectively.
without a physical exam, imaging study or lab test. The service, currently available to those residing or traveling in Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin, has treated more than 50,000 cases.

About virtuwell.com
virtuwell® (www.virtuwell.com) is a 24/7 online clinic developed by HealthPartners. Designed from a consumer perspective, virtuwell delivers a refreshingly simple and affordable health care experience. More than 40 common conditions like sinus and bladder infections are treated at virtuwell, including minor skin conditions like acne and rashes through the easy picture-sharing experience. If needed, prescriptions are sent electronically to the customer’s pharmacy. Since its 2010 launch, virtuwell has treated tens of thousands of customers and 9 out of 10 would recommend to family or friends.

About HealthPartners
Founded in 1957, the HealthPartners (www.healthpartners.com) family of health care companies serves more than 1.4 million medical and dental health plan members nationwide. It includes a multispecialty group practice of more than 1,700 physicians; five hospitals; 44 primary care clinics; 18 urgent care locations; 20 dental clinics; and numerous specialty practices in Minnesota and Western Wisconsin. HealthPartners is the largest consumer-governed, nonprofit health care organization in the nation providing care, coverage, research and education to improve the health of members, patients and the community. HealthPartners is the top-ranked commercial health plan in Minnesota and is also ranked among the top 30 plans in the nation according to NCQA’s Health Insurance Plan Rankings 2012-13 - private.