



## Blood tests without prescriptions urged

**Insurance firm says 'you should be able to take some responsibility for your health'**

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Staten Islanders could better track and maintain their health if they could get blood tests without a doctor's prescription.

That's the belief of Carmine Morano, president of Staten Island's PerfectHealth Insurance, who has written to state and local legislators, urging them to help make nonprescribed tests a reality.

"We believe you should be able to take some responsibility for your health," he said.

While dozens of states allow blood tests without prescriptions, New York laws prohibit most blood screening done without a doctor's sanction, because of the risk of people buying unnecessary tests and not getting the appropriate follow-up care.

But as medicine increasingly moves toward a consumer-based model -- where people research their health concerns and companies market directly to them -- Morano and others envision consumer blood testing as one more part of a sea change in how health care is delivered nationwide.

As a marketer of health insurance, Morano has a stake in this development. But it's also personal. He said a friend, Thomas Ginch, 51, of New Springville, died in 2003 when a doctor neglected to tell him in time about his extremely high blood sugar levels.

Ginch's death is now the subject of a lawsuit that accuses his doctor of negligence for allegedly failing to contact him after tests revealed the abnormal numbers.

Even before then, in December 2002, Ginch's doctor did not tell him his blood-sugar levels were slightly elevated, according to a lawyer representing Ginch's family, Oscar Michelen. While the numbers at that time might not have warranted immediate action, Ginch at least would have been aware of the potential danger, the lawyer said.

### LACK OF NEWS

"People think if they don't hear from the doctor, it might be OK," Morano said.

In his friend's case, lack of news prevented him from getting the care he needed, Morano said.

Morano and others in the health care business believe that patients can better care for themselves by taking control of the care they receive, including having blood tests without a doctor's oversight.

Quest Diagnostics Inc., of Teterboro, N.J., began selling such tests in 2001, calling it a response

to an increasingly health-conscious society, in which people research their conditions via the Internet and shop with an eye to healthy foods.

Now, Quest has 650 centers that do such consumer testing in 25 states, including Connecticut and Ohio, and the District of Columbia.

New York is not one of those states, due to laws prohibiting most nonprescribed blood tests. People can get such tests at New York laboratories only if the same test is available as an FDA-approved, over-the-counter kit.

While some believe these laws block opportunities for self-care, the state Health Department supports the laws as necessary to ensure that patients get the best health care possible.

"Our priority is to protect the health of all New Yorkers," said Joe DiMura, a Health Department spokesman. "The law helps ensure that consumers receive appropriate and cost-effective medical care, follow-up testing and/or treatment under consultation with a primary care physician."

Insurance companies typically do not cover nonprescribed tests, which can cost from \$20 to \$150, according to the Web site for so-called QuesTest services.

Quest gears its consumer tests toward "the worried well" -- people between ages 35 and 65 who want to safeguard their good health, said Kate Langevin, the company's business director for consumer health.

Company representatives say people often buy blood tests as a prelude to visiting the doctor. Available tests include those for thyroid function, cholesterol and blood-sugar levels, kidney, liver and heart health, for blood type and to screen for anemia.

## **DOCTOR'S VISIT**

"What we tell people is, this is not meant to be a replacement for a doctor's visit," said Gary Samuels, a Quest spokesman.

Other consumers buy tests for the convenience of getting the results when they want them, he said. Customers can see their results online in two or three days, or in seven to 10 business days if they order the results by mail.

Before getting a nonprescribed blood test, a potential consumer answers a few basic medical questions, which are reviewed to determine whether the screening is appropriate to his or her situation. The company says test results are easy to read, and that lab workers are available to help interpret results. -RT

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