

## A LOOK UNDER THE HOOD:

# How Insurance Certificates Can Help You Better Understand the Policies That You Sell

By BRENDAN SHARKEY

Recently an insurance broker, whom I've known for over a decade, shared an interesting story. He had sold international health insurance for some time but was looking for specifics around a product that a carrier was soliciting him to promote. For instance, how well would the policy cover his expat clients if they were to return to the U.S. for a visit or to seek treatment at a center of excellence? Naturally, he contacted the insurance provider to get answers. When he asked to see a sample policy certificate he was sent a scant, three-page document—not much more than a benefit schedule. It seemed that it wasn't company policy to reveal what's under the hood. The problem was, a brief three-page marketing piece wouldn't provide the level of detail he was looking for. He had experienced this with other carriers and had the benefit of intimately knowing their policy terms, definitions and exclusions and knew that a certificate of insurance should be 40 to 50 pages of detail, not three. After some back and forth, my friend realized he was fighting a losing battle. So, he decided, "If I'm not able to understand and feel comfortable with the product I'm being asked to sell... maybe I shouldn't be selling it at all."

## SETTING EXPECTATIONS

With the various channels available for news and information, you would be hard pressed to find anyone starved for information these days. We're not



a society that is used to being left in the dark. So why should you expect anything different when it comes to the insurance policies you are asked to sell? I wondered why a company would refuse to enthusiastically share information that could potentially lead to more sales? How does that make sense? Well, it only makes sense if that company feels that sharing the information might do more damage than good.

To be successful in this space, you must earn both the trust and respect of your clients. After all, you aren't selling just anything. You're selling peace of mind. In order to gain your clients' trust, they have to believe you

have their best interests at heart. To gain their respect, you need to prove your expertise will help navigate them through a twisted labyrinth of paperwork and legalese. You can't do either if you are unfamiliar with the inner workings of a policy that you sell—a fact most certainly understood by the companies that write those very policies.

## TAKING THE RIGHT APPROACH

While some insurance providers may discourage transparency, my team at GeoBlue encourages prospects and our broker partners to examine our insurance certificates inside and out (they are posted publicly on our web-



sites). We know that a more informed broker achieves more shared success and we tell our contracted agents that while two policies may appear similar, a thorough review of the insurance certificate can reveal significant differences. We invite them to find out what those differences are. Here are three important categories to investigate as you review any international health insurance certificate:

**1. Maternity**

International health insurance providers may offer various levels of coverage for routine delivery and unexpected events like premature labor and neonatal care. They may even differ in the amount of coverage extended to infants. These differences can have a major financial impact on young families. And no broker looks forward to a phone call from a sleep-deprived parent who just learned their insurance wasn't as comprehensive as they had thought.

**2. Pre-existing conditions**

Clients who suffer from pre-existing conditions depend on adequate coverage more than others. Some health insurance providers limit or deny coverage for these conditions, or consider an issue that has occurred at any point in the client's life to be "pre-existing," no matter how much time has passed. An insurance certificate will highlight specifics regarding the coverage of pre-existing conditions, how they are defined and the look back period. Some carriers underwrite to cover all

conditions, while others specifically rider out personal health issues based upon the patient's history. This is sometimes referred to as moratorium underwriting. These details are almost never evident in a simple benefits schedule.

**COMPARING INSURANCE CERTIFICATES FROM SIMILAR POLICIES SHOWS THE REAL DIFFERENCE IN COVERAGE.**

	Carrier 1	Carrier 2	Carrier 3
<b>Pre-Existing Condition Definition</b>	Any illness or condition that existed at the time of application or at any time prior to the effective date, whether or not previously manifested, symptomatic or known, diagnosed, treated, or disclosed to the company prior to the effective date	Any disease, illness or injury, or symptoms linked to such disease, illness or injury for which medical advice or treatment has been sought or received or the beneficiary knew about and did not seek medical advice or treatment before the initial start date	A condition that was treated or diagnosed by a legally qualified physician occurring within 6 months prior to the coverage date for the insured
<b>Pre-ex look back period</b>	2 years	Lifetime	6 months
<b>Routine Nursery Care of a Newborn Child of a Covered Pregnancy</b>	\$1,000 additional deductible, \$50,000 lifetime maximum, \$200 wellness benefit for first 12 months	Up to \$156,000; at least one parent has been covered by policy for a continuous 10 months prior to child's birth	Unlimited (covered as any other condition)
<b>Neonatal Intensive Care Unit</b>	\$250,000 maximum for first 31 days	Up to \$156,000	Unlimited. Newborn is automatically covered
<b>Precertification Penalties</b>	Required for transplants; 50% reduction of eligible medical expenses if pre-certification provisions are not met	Certain penalties may apply. In addition to prior approval for treatment; further approval may be required for maternity and childbirth benefit	No precertification required except for transplants or medical evacuations
<b>Freedom to travel to another country including the U.S. for purposes of seeking care (including elective treatment for cancer, heart disease or orthopedic replacements)</b>	Maximum limit of 30 days per insured person per period of coverage for accidents or emergency treatment only. Treatment in the U.S. must be received from a physician, hospital or other healthcare provider within the preferred provider network	Excluded (where the worldwide including U.S. cover was purchased) if known or reasonably suspect that the cover was purchased and the beneficiary travelled to the U.S. for the purpose of receiving treatment	Covered (where the Worldwide including U.S. cover was purchased). Subject to qualifying period of prior credible health coverage

**3. Traveling outside of your host country for treatment**

In some cases, clients living abroad may need, or want, to travel to another region for treatment. The U.S. leads the world in medical outcomes for many treatments. According to Concord, a program which measures cancer survival rates, brain tumor survival rates among children ranged from a mere 28.9 percent in Brazil to a stunning 78.2 percent in the U.S. For similar reasons, your overseas clients may rely on their health insurance policy

to cover treatment in other countries, including elective care back home in the U.S. Certain policies, like the ones offered by GeoBlue, can provide comprehensive coverage for these types of situations, while other providers may limit home country coverage to only illness and accidents.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

An effective broker is an educated broker, especially when dealing with international health-care policies, which tend to have vastly different terms compared to traditional domestic insurance. If the carriers you promote won't readily post a sample policy online or even make their insurance certificates available, how well are they protecting you and your clients' best interests? Never put your business or your reputation at risk for a company that refuses to be transparent. Your customers deserve and expect more. They are relying on you to be the expert and placing their trust in you to navigate a myriad of potential perils. ★



*Brendan Sharkey is the director of individual product sales for GeoBlue. GeoBlue is the trade name for the international health insurance programs of Worldwide Insurance Services, an independent licensee of the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association. GeoBlue combines mobile technology and worldwide healthcare expertise to deliver assistance and health benefits for the health, safety and convenience of world travelers.*