

CREATING CHANGE BY Building THE Knowledge Base

Grantmakers have played a role in many of the discoveries that have transformed the health landscape. The first foundations, formed in the early part of the 20th century, catalyzed dramatic improvements in public health, medical education, and medical care. The Rockefeller Foundation, for example, was instrumental in efforts to eradicate malaria, yellow fever, and other infectious diseases in the U.S. and overseas through support for data collection, research, and public health measures. More recently, grantmakers have been instrumental in supporting groundbreaking research on chronic diseases and other conditions that claim hundreds of thousands of American lives each year and reduce the quality of life for countless others.

Building the knowledge base has the potential to revolutionize the way health services are designed and delivered. The ways that grantmakers can contribute are as varied as grantmakers themselves and include supporting data collection, funding research, and evaluating new approaches to program design and implementation. Achieving health improvements by building the knowledge base, however, can require patience and a willingness to make investments that may not pay off. Grantmakers interested in using this strategy to improve health should consider the following:

- **Long-term versus short-term commitments** – It is often impossible to know when an investment in research or other knowledge generation activities is going to bear fruit. One only need look at grantmaker support for new models for eliminating health disparities to understand that bringing the best minds to bear on a problem is no promise of a quick solution. A need to see progress quickly or an ability to make only short-term commitments may lead grantmakers to invest in activities such as data collection, evaluation, or exploratory research that builds a base for securing longer-term public funding.
- **Tolerance for risk** – Investment in knowledge generation is, in many ways, speculation. Some avenues of investigation will lead to advances and innovations, while others will lead nowhere. While knowing what doesn't work is often as valuable as knowing what does, the chance that grant funds may not result in health improvements may represent an unacceptable risk for some grantmakers.
- **Potential partners** – Partnerships can help grantmakers maximize the benefit of any investment in knowledge generation. In one recent example, The John A. Hartford Foundation teamed up with the California HealthCare

Foundation, the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health, and The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to test the effectiveness of a new model for identifying and treating late-life depression. These partnerships boosted the funding available for the evaluation and increased the number of test sites for the new model, increasing the reliability of the evaluation.

- **Leveraging other resources** – Federal agencies are significant funding sources for research. Applying for federal funding, however, typically requires infrastructure, a track record, time, and other resources. Even relatively modest grants can make a significant contribution to knowledge generation if they help researchers gain access to public funding. In one example, The *Freedom to Discover* grants awarded by the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Inc., provide critical early support to researchers exploring new hypotheses. The grants give researchers the time and money needed to identify promising avenues and assemble the preliminary data needed to apply for government funding.
- **Disseminating findings** – Discoveries are only useful if they are applied to everyday problems and routine practice. Communications planning should therefore be an integral part of any funding strategy to ensure that findings are disseminated to appropriate audiences in a timely fashion. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation includes a section on communicating findings and utilizing results in its evaluation handbook for grantees. The handbook discusses steps that should be taken early in the evaluation planning process, as well as follow-up steps to ensure that findings are disseminated in a way that is accessible and meaningful to key stakeholders.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GRANTMAKERS

The following provides examples of possible approaches to building the knowledge base for health services and health care. It highlights just a few of the contributions that health grantmakers have made in the areas of data collection, basic and clinical research, health services research, and evaluation.

- **Data Collection** – Health grantmakers are supporting the collection of data to serve a variety of purposes: improving the quality of health care, documenting disparities in access, identifying pockets of unmet need, and providing early warning signals of future shortages of workers or service infrastructure. In one example, the Maine Health Access Foundation is supporting an effort by Maine's Department

of Human Services and a statewide child advocacy organization to develop a set of children's mental health indicators and begin the process of collecting data. The aim is to develop a clearer picture of the status of children's mental health that will be used to guide the development of a more responsive and accessible service system. In another example, The Aetna Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the Aetna health plan, is leading the insurance field in measuring and eliminating health disparities among minority children. The foundation has partnered with a national children's advocacy organization, the Children's Defense Fund (CDF), to collect and analyze data on health disparities between minority children and white children of similar incomes and insurance status. The foundation and the company will then work with CDF, health providers, and others to identify and implement promising approaches for closing the gap.

- **Basic and Clinical Research** – From basic research aimed at probing the workings of the human body and mind to applied research aimed at improving medical practices and treatments, health grantmakers are playing a key role in supporting scientific inquiry. The support provided by large international funders such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Wellcome Trust often receive the most attention from the public and press. But other types of grantmakers are important players as well. The Gerber Foundation, established as the corporate giving program of the Gerber Products Companies and now a private foundation, supports a wide range of research aimed at promoting health and preventing illness among infants and young children. Recent grants from the foundation are supporting, among other projects, a study of the risk factors for iron deficiency anemia in low birth weight babies and a study to determine the effects of choline, an essential nutrient, on brain development and function in infants.
- **Health Services Research** – Health services research supported by grantmakers is improving the way health and related services are delivered. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is a major funder of this type of research, through national programs such as:
 - *Changes in Health Care Financing and Organization*, which supports policy analysis, research, evaluation, and demonstration projects that provide policymakers with usable and timely information on health policy issues; and
 - *Health e-Technologies: Building the Science of eHealth*, which is supporting research on the effectiveness of interactive applications for health behavior change and chronic disease management.

The Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan Foundation also funds health services research. The foundation's initiative, *Improving Men's Health Through Early Detection*, is supporting research, demonstration projects, and evaluation to identify effective strategies for increasing men's use of screening tests and boosting follow-up rates. The goal is to

improve men's health by detecting diseases at early stages when treatment is most effective.

Health services research examines how people get access to health care, how much care costs, and what happens to patients as a result of this care... It aims to identify the most effective ways to organize, manage, finance, and deliver high quality care; reduce medical errors; and improve patient safety.

Source: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, *Fact Sheet. Helping the Nation with Health Services Research* (Rockville, MD: 2002).

- **Evaluation** – By identifying what works and what does not, evaluation can help funders focus on the most promising approaches, thereby increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of health care and health services. Many grantmakers support evaluation as a component of initiatives and grants; making this a routine requirement provides grantmakers and their grantees with valuable information about the degree to which the goals of a particular investment have been achieved. The Commonwealth Fund, which worked with over 100 other funders to support the *Healthy Steps* program to improve developmental services to young children and their families, made evaluation of the program a key component. A rigorous evaluation found significant improvements in the provision of anticipatory guidance by providers, receipt of timely well-child care and vaccinations by the children, use of more appropriate discipline techniques by parents, and disclosure of possible mental health problems by mothers. Because of the importance of sharing evaluation results, the foundation and its partners also invested in the production and dissemination of printed reports, as well as a Web site and other multimedia resources.

Grantmakers are also helping others design and implement evaluations by developing and disseminating technical assistance documents. In addition to the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's evaluation handbook mentioned previously, grantmaker-supported evaluation manuals include the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health's *Evaluating Child Abuse Prevention Programs: A Resource Guidebook for Service Providers* and the James Irvine Foundation's *A Participatory Model for Evaluating Social Programs*.

This article is part of GIH's portfolio, Agents of Change: Health Philanthropy's Role in Transforming Systems. Each article focuses on an approach grantmakers are using to promote systemic or social change. The entire portfolio is available on GIH's Web site www.gih.org.

RESOURCES

W.K. Kellogg Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Evaluation Handbook (Battle Creek, MI: 1998), available on-line at www.wkcf.org/Pubs/Tools/Evaluation/Pub770.pdf.

Hasenfeld, Yeheskel, *A Participatory Model for Evaluating Social Programs* (San Francisco, CA: James Irvine Foundation, 2002), available on-line at www.irvine.org/assets/pdf/pubs/evaluation/Eval_Social.pdf.