

Considering Quality:

Engaging Consumers to Make Better Health Decisions

Given information and opportunity, consumers can play an important role in improving health care quality and the responsiveness of the health system to their needs. Whether they are making decisions about choosing a health plan, a particular provider, a course of treatment, or how to incorporate healthy choices into their daily lives, empowered and engaged consumers can be a potent force for change.

The sheer volume of health information currently available to consumers is staggering. There are between 10,000 and 100,000 health-focused Web sites; many of these offer downloadable publications and interactive decisionmaking tools. An estimated 70 million Americans now use the Internet to retrieve health information, search the Web for health care facilities and providers, find comparative quality information, research a specific illness or disease and learn about treatment options, and find information about healthy lifestyles (IOM 2001).

Despite the richness of these resources, consumers often have difficulty interpreting and using such information. Health care decisionmaking requires consumers to use information that includes technical terms and to compare multiple options simultaneously. For example, as consumers consider specific quality measures, such as how frequently heart attack patients received beta-blocker treatment, they must also think about other important factors, such as cost or accessibility. They must also weigh factors according to individual values, needs, and preferences.

Information about health care must be readily available to consumers when it is needed, understandable, and relevant to the decisions people need to make. It must be clear and designed to accommodate differences in consumer characteristics, such as literacy level and English proficiency. And while consumers want unbiased, expert information, they also want to know how others like them evaluate care (AHRQ 2005). Finally, quality information also needs to be widely disseminated and available through organizations that consumers trust.

As technology continues to advance, information about health and health care quality may become more user friendly. As patient-provider e-mail, on-line support groups, and many other Internet applications become more accessible to consumers making important health care decisions; information

about quality may begin to affect the way consumers make decisions about the care they receive.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GRANTMAKERS

Helping consumers access and interpret health information fits into the mission of many foundations as they seek to improve the health of individuals and communities. Health grantmakers can help make quality information accessible, support the development of information technology to collect and disseminate information, and support advocacy efforts to help consumers understand their health care choices and integrate quality into decisions.

► ***Making Information Accessible*** – Grantmakers have an important role to play in ensuring that understandable and usable information reaches consumers. The Commonwealth Fund has supported a broad body of work to collect and present quality information. For example, research supported by the fund found that many of the Web sites that consumers turn to for information on health care providers have missing or out-of-date information, as well as limited search capabilities. By making measures of provider quality available, such tools can help consumers in the selection process and lead to more informed care choices. These findings spurred a grant to the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) to develop an advisory group to create standards for physician directories. Based on the advisory groups' recommendations, the Midwest Business Group on Health conducted a demonstration project in which a group of Chicago-based health plans, hospitals, and physician organizations implemented the recommended standards and evaluated the cost and value of doing so. This work yielded a blueprint for creating physician directories that meet NCQA recommended standards.

An integral part of the California HealthCare Foundation's quality improvement work has been to educate consumers about health care quality and to make comparative quality information readily available. The foundation has developed a rich array of strategies, educational materials, and tools to help Californians make informed health care decisions. Specifically, the foundation supported the development of CalHospitals.org, a Web-

based tool that allows consumers to learn about patient experiences at California hospitals. This survey tool measures eight aspects of hospital performance, including respect for patients' preferences and expressed needs, coordination of care and integration of services, information and education, physical comfort and pain relief, emotional support and alleviation of fears and anxieties, involvement of family and friends, experience with safe medical practices, and transition to home and continuity of care. The surveys are administered at 200 California hospitals, and results are available in both English and Spanish at CalHospitals.org and in print formats.

- **Supporting Information Technology** – Foundations are uniquely positioned to support the spread of information technology as a vehicle for communicating health information. They can also assist in the development of Web-based applications that can improve the flow of health information and improve patient-provider communication.

To advance scientific knowledge regarding the effectiveness of interactive applications to promote health behavior change and chronic disease management, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation developed its national *Health e-Technologies* initiative. This grant program supports development and research of technological applications for health care such as the Internet, interactive TV, voice response systems, personal digital assistants, and CD-ROMs. Program grantees are evaluating the effectiveness of tools to improve patient-provider communication, contain costs, provide reliable health information, reduce medical errors, and enhance the efficiency of the health care system. For example, the researchers are evaluating the potential of technology to improve chronic disease management and quality of care in the Cleveland, Ohio metropolitan area. This project will evaluate the effectiveness of the Cleveland Clinic Foundation's Internet portal for diabetic patients. The research will determine if a portal approach to diabetes management can influence patient outcomes and if additional interventions can encourage greater technology adoption and patient compliance. Outcomes from this study may be generalized to other chronic diseases and health maintenance initiatives.

The Blue Shield of California Foundation's Center for Technology and Health supports research on the impact of information technology for both patients and providers. In 2001, the center supported an evaluation of RelayHealth, an on-line communication tool for patients, providers, payers, and pharmacies. RelayHealth facilitates clinical consultations about nonurgent medical symptoms via a secure Internet connection. Evaluation results of RelayHealth used by patients and providers in the Blue Shield of California health plan network revealed reductions in both office visits and total cost of care. In addition, physician and patient surveys showed that the majority of both groups found the service

easy to use, satisfying, and preferable to an office visit. Tools such as RelayHealth can help improve health care quality by increasing patient access to providers in nonemergency situations. It can also improve consumer satisfaction by reducing appointment wait times and unnecessary physician office visits, as well as enhancing access to prescription medications, when needed.

- **Consumer Advocacy** – Foundations can support advocacy organizations to ensure that consumers have the information they need to make appropriate health care choices. In response to changes in the Medicare program, The California Wellness Foundation awarded a grant to California Health Advocates (CHA) to ensure that Medicare beneficiaries have access to accurate information on changes to the program, such as the addition of a prescription drug benefit. With the grant, CHA is establishing a centralized office in Sacramento to enhance the Medicare education and advocacy activities provided by the state's Health Insurance Counseling Advocacy Programs (HICAPs). HICAPs are staffed by volunteers and provide telephone assistance and one-on-one counseling to Medicare beneficiaries and their families.

The California HealthCare Foundation has also encouraged consumers and patient groups to become involved in health care quality issues. Through *Allies for Quality*, a three-year, \$2 million initiative begun in 2001, the foundation awarded grants to support advocacy organizations in their efforts to increase consumer awareness of health care quality problems, increase consumer and patient use of existing quality measurement tools, promote the use of evidence-based treatment guidelines by consumers, and develop and implement policies to improve health care quality. Grantee organizations used a variety of strategies to bring quality information to consumers, including the use of community health workers, training community health care champions, and engaging community and state stakeholders in health care quality issues. For example, the Community Health Workers/Promotoras Network is working in partnership with the Ernesto Galarza Applied Research Center at the University of California, Riverside to improve the quality of care received by Latinos by supporting community health worker and promotora programs. Specifically, the network is enhancing promotoras' awareness of health quality and building their capacity to address health quality issues in their communities.

SOURCES

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Institute of Medicine, *Crossing the Quality Chasm* (Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences, 2001).