

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CONSIDERING QUALITY:

Engaging Consumers to Make Better Health Care Decisions

On May 19, 2005, Grantmakers In Health (GIH) convened nearly 50 grantmakers and leaders in the field of health care quality to discuss the challenges inherent in developing quality information, as well as how consumers use such information. This Issue Brief examines the potential of consumers to use information to select high-quality health services and to become drivers of quality improvement at the systems level. There are three broadly used mechanisms for connecting consumers to information: report cards on health plans and providers, decision support aides, and the Internet. Health foundations can play an important role in developing and disseminating quality information for consumers. They can support the development of quality indicators; assess the effectiveness of information technology, including the Internet; and fund advocacy efforts to ensure consumers have the information needed to make appropriate health care choices.

The average American faces an increasingly complex array of health care decisions. These include choosing health insurance plans, selecting practitioners, learning about medical conditions, and being party to decisions about treatment options. Federal and state government agencies, health plans, employers, unions, advocacy groups, and others are collecting and disseminating information. At the same time, the number of tools available to consumers, such as report cards, Web sites, and decision aids, has proliferated.

Informed consumers are viewed as an important part of the solution to concerns about costs, access, and quality in the health care system. Information about the quality of health care can help consumers make purchasing decisions, and empower them to make choices consistent with their personal preferences, needs, and values. At a broader systems level, quality information can create new incentives for health plans and provider organizations to compete on performance by making care more accessible, effective, and efficient.

Even though extensive information is available, consumers often have difficulty interpreting and using it. Health care decisions require 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 think about other important factors, such as cost or accessibility. They also must weigh factors according to individual values, needs, and preferences.

Consumer information about health care must be available, understandable, and relevant. The clarity of health information and how it is presented can influence how consumers understand and use it. Information also must be designed to accommodate differences in consumer characteristics, such as English proficiency and literacy level. Materials can be made available in a variety of languages and at reading levels that are understood by most individuals. Information needs to be relevant to the decisions people need to make. While consumers want unbiased, expert information, they also want to know how others like them evaluate care (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality 2005). Finally, quality information also needs to be widely disseminated and available through organizations that consumers trust.

There are a variety of mechanisms for providing consumers with information about health care quality, including:

- **Report cards:** Report cards, which provide comparative information on health plans and providers, are being disseminated by employers, business coalitions, government agencies, and others to help consumers understand how their options rate with respect to the technical quality of care or consumers' experiences. The impact of report cards, however, is mixed. Study results are difficult to extrapolate as they tend to focus on a specific geographic area or on one or two specific quality measures. In addition, research shows that only half of those who see report cards use the information (The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation 2004).

- **Decision support tools:** Decision aids can be used to help consumers understand the likely outcomes of treatment options by presenting a balanced picture of the available evidence. This may encourage them to think about their values as they relate to the risks and benefits of treatment options, and help them take a more active role in decisions about care. In controlled trials, decision aids have been shown to improve knowledge about treatment options, create more realistic expectations about treatment, reduce frustration with the decisionmaking process, and encourage consumers to be more active decisionmakers.
- **On-line resources:** The Internet is transforming the way consumers access and use health care information. Estimates suggest that the number of health-focused Web sites varies from between 10,000 to 100,000, while an estimated 70 million Americans use the Internet to retrieve health information (Institute of Medicine 2001). Consumers can search the Web for health care facilities and providers, find comparative quality information, research specific conditions and learn about treatment options, and find information about healthy lifestyles. In addition, health information is available quickly and in many formats, such as interactive Internet applications or downloadable publications.

Helping consumers access and interpret health information fits into the mission of many foundations.

Health grantmakers can help make quality information accessible by supporting the dissemination of publications that guide consumers through the decisionmaking process and that present comparative quality information in an understandable, consumer-friendly format. They can also support organizations that maintain the Web sites consumers turn to for information.

Foundations are uniquely positioned to support the spread of information technology as a vehicle for health information. For example, they can fund the development of technology to collect data on quality. They can also assist in the development of Web-based applications that improve the flow of health information

and patient-provider communication, as well as fund research on the impact of such technology.

Finally, foundations can support advocacy organizations to ensure consumers have the information they need to make appropriate health care choices. Funders can also encourage consumers and patient groups to become involved in health care quality issues such as increased use of evidence-based treatment guidelines and the development of policies to improve health care quality.

Sources

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, *Talking to Consumers about Health Care Quality*, <<http://www.talkingquality.gov>>, March 1, 2005.

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

The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, *National Survey on Consumers' Experiences with Patient Safety and Quality Information* (Menlo Park, CA: 2004).