



# Health Policy Snapshot

Health Care Quality

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## ISSUE BRIEF

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## What is the National Quality Strategy?

### Takeaways:

- The National Quality Strategy is the first overarching policy designed to lead federal, state and local efforts in improving the quality of America's health care.
- The strategy establishes three objectives: (1) to make health care more accessible, safe and patient-centered; (2) to address environmental, social and behavioral influences on health and health care; and (3) to make care more affordable.
- The strategy sets six priorities that must be addressed to meet these aims and proposes ways for those who give, receive, and pay for care to identify areas for improvement and measure progress.

### Overview

Health care spending in the United States now totals \$2.5 trillion a year, the most per capita in the world. Yet Americans have shorter life expectancy and higher infant mortality rates than other wealthy countries, suggesting that the amount of money spent is not translating into better care. To address this problem, the 2010 Affordable Care Act (ACA) requires the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to establish a National Strategy for Quality Improvement in Health Care, also known as the National Quality Strategy. The strategy, submitted to Congress on March 21, 2011,

is the first policy to set national goals to improve the quality of health care. It will also guide all HHS quality improvement programs and regulations, and set standard criteria to measure the quality of health and health care to align national efforts for quality improvement.

### WHAT DEFINES QUALITY CARE?

Quality has many definitions, but there is consensus among researchers and policymakers that high-quality care is when providers give patients the right care when they need it, such as regularly monitoring chronic conditions to make sure complications don't arise. Similarly, they do not give patients unnecessary care, such as unnecessary diagnostic scans that expose patients to radiation. High-quality care is based on the best medical knowledge and research about what helps people get better and stay well, rather than individual opinions or convenience. High-quality care is tailored to a patient's preferences and values. It is accessible and reliable for all and does not vary because of race, gender, income or location. High-quality care means that providers are respectful, communicate clearly, and involve patients in decisions about their care.

### NATIONAL QUALITY STRATEGY GOALS

The National Quality Strategy established three objectives to improve the quality of care that Americans receive:

- **Better care.** All Americans should receive recommended preventive care, such as cancer screenings, and have any sickness or medical condition treated with a low risk of harm. In

addition, patients with chronic illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes or asthma should get recommended tests and talk to their physician about how best to manage their health.

- **Healthy people and communities.** Because health and health care are not solely determined by what happens within a doctor’s office or hospital, initiatives aiming to improve quality must also acknowledge environmental, social and behavioral issues that affect quality. The strategy will implement programs proven to address such problems as childhood obesity, smoking, alcohol and substance abuse, cardiovascular disease and access to healthy foods.
- **Affordable care.** To lower overall health care costs, providers need to coordinate and share information with each other, which will reduce administrative time and prevent redundant care and hospital readmissions. In addition, they are encouraged to establish websites that report on the quality and costs of care provided by hospitals and doctors’ offices as a way to improve transparency and help consumers make informed decisions on where to go for health care. The strategy also fosters new payment structures that reward providers for delivering care that is proven to keep patients healthy, rather than paying for each service and procedure.

## SIX NATIONAL PRIORITIES

The National Quality Strategy identifies six priorities necessary to achieve the three objectives:

- **Reducing harm to patients,** such as health care-acquired infections and medical errors. For example, hospitals aim to improve hygiene practices to curb the number of infections patients get from central line catheters used to administer medication, fluids and nutrients to patients.
- **Facilitating more coordination and communication** among providers to make transitions among hospitals and physicians efficient and easier for patients, so that patients understand what to do after they leave a hospital or an appointment, and when to follow up with another appointment.
- **Empowering patients** and their caregivers to become more involved in care. For example, patients can be encouraged to use decision-making aids to help them participate in decisions about their care. Patients will be surveyed to collect data on their preferences and experiences.
- **Implementing evidence-based prevention and treatment plans** for common chronic illnesses. For example, smokers can be offered smoking cessation services that have been proven to work.
- **Promoting healthy behaviors and environments** at the community level. For example, more providers can screen adults for risky alcohol use and, if necessary, follow up with counseling.
- **Developing and using new delivery models** that reduce costs while improving quality.

The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) will oversee the National Quality Strategy and provide annual updates on its progress to Congress and all Americans.

Adapted from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ “Report to Congress: National Strategy for Quality Improvement in Health Care” March 2011.

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- [\*Provisions Related to Quality in the New Health Reform Law \(RWJF\)\*](#)
- [\*Report to Congress: National Strategy for Quality Improvement in Health Care \(HHS\)\*](#)
- [\*About the National Quality Strategy \(AHRQ\)\*](#)