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Linking Data in South Carolina Enables Analyses Across Health Care Settings

Information for State Health Policy Program

SUMMARY

From 1992 to 1997, South Carolina's Division of Research and Statistical Services developed a data systems improvement plan to link patient and program systems into a full patient-centered database extending across all health care settings over an extended period of time.

Project staff also worked to create a Data Oversight Council to make recommendations concerning health care data issues in the state.

The project was part of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) *Information for State Health Policy* national program.

Key Results

- South Carolina passed legislation in 1993 that created the Data Oversight Council (DOC), composed of representatives from both the public and private sectors. The council makes periodic recommendations to a legislative health care committee concerning:
  - What data systems should be built in the state.
  - What analyses should be performed.
  - What data and information can be disseminated for public use.
- The DOC gathered information on data release policies from 26 states and numerous professional organizations and constructed its own data release protocol.
- Project staff linked multiple data sets together—for instance, hospital discharge data with emergency room data, outpatient surgery data, birth and death records, mental health data, and other data sets. The database is intended to enable analyses across health care settings and over time.

Funding

RWJF supported this project through two grants totaling $1,075,000.

THE PROBLEM

In South Carolina, data were plentiful, but were not organized in a way that informed decision- makers or consumers. The state's challenge has been to develop a formal on-going method for linking health data with health policy development and program management. To this end, one of the project's objectives was to build a virtual data center to bring together all the important data relevant to decision-making on health care.

THE PROJECT

Data Release

South Carolina passed legislation in 1993 that created the Data Oversight Council (DOC). The DOC is composed of representatives from both the public and private sectors.

The DOC's purpose was to make periodic recommendations to a legislative health care committee concerning what data systems should be built in the state, what analyses should be performed, and what data and information can be disseminated for public use. The DOC's activities focused increasingly over time on the latter—data release issues.

The DOC gathered information on data release policies from 26 states and numerous professional organizations and constructed its own data release protocol. The protocol was used to review each new data request and to determine if data could be released to the requester. The DOC has a policy that favors release of data but protects confidential data on patients and providers. The DOC will continue to make data release decisions.

Data Linkages

With InfoSHP funding, multiple data sets were linked together. Hospital discharge data were linked with emergency room data, outpatient surgery data, birth and death records, mental health data, and other data sets. The database is intended to enable analyses across health care settings and over time. The data have not yet been used extensively but project staff are working toward marketing it to policymakers and researchers.

Institutionalization

The DOC, data linkages project, and Web page development will continue.

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The key accomplishments were the establishment of the DOC, the data release policy, and the data linkage project. In addition, the DOC provided an opportunity to bring together key players to discuss data issues and promote the use of valuable health data.

Communications

South Carolina has been very active in publishing and presenting data from the state. Health care researchers, policymakers, and others can directly access public use databases through the website (see the Bibliography).

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **In states with low demand for data, the process of building a data infrastructure and promoting the use of data in policymaking is an incremental, long-term effort.** Activities should focus on building partnerships between public and private organizations, and data producers and users. Also, placing data projects in a neutral location will facilitate these types of efforts.

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