Improving Health Care Quality: Why You Should Get Involved and How You Can Make a Difference

The Problem

Our health care system is broken. We've all experienced it for ourselves, watched loved ones suffer needlessly or talked with our constituents about their heart-breaking health care experiences. Studies show that, as a nation, we only get the right care — at the right time and for the right reason — about half the time.[i] 50/50. No better than the flip of a coin. Women and people of color tend to receive lower quality health care, even when insurance status, income, age and severity of conditions are considered.[ii] Quality also varies widely depending on where patients live.[iii]

And this is the United States. We spend more on health care than any other nation.

Health care is increasingly recognized as a shared responsibility among individuals, employers, providers, insurers and the government. Yet families are not getting good value in the form of high quality care at reasonable cost for their investment in the "shared responsibility" equation. America's health care system is largely blind to quality, outcomes or appropriateness of the care delivered and received. Despite spending more than any other country on health care[iv] and being home to some of the brightest, best trained, and most committed health care professionals in the world, patients are not getting the best care in the world. From 2004 to 2006, patient safety incidents resulted in 238,337 potentially preventable deaths and cost Medicare $8.8 billion.[v]

National Initiatives--Local Focus

Your community is one of 17 communities around the country involved in the Aligning Forces for Quality (AF4Q) initiative, a signature effort of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. AF4Q is working to lift the overall quality of health care, reduce racial and ethnic disparities, and provide models for national reform. AF4Q asks the people who get care, give care and pay for care to work together toward common, fundamental objectives to lead to better care. The $300 million commitment to improve health care in the 17 communities is the largest effort of its kind ever undertaken by a U.S. philanthropy.

A key component of AF4Q are the multi-stakeholder Alliances comprised of health insurance plans, health care providers, employers, and consumers—both individual and community organizations. These Alliances are tasked with achieving the AF4Q goals. Your role as a consumer leader and a trusted messenger in your community is a valued resource among other stakeholders and would enhance the efforts of the AF4Q Alliances by making sure their efforts deliver real benefits to consumers.

How Can You Make a Difference?

There are multi-stakeholder groups working to improve our health care system at the local, state and national levels. Consumer perspectives are critical in these efforts, as your constituents should be at the center of these reforms. Your constituents share with you what is working and what gaps exist as they access and use health care services. Communicating your constituents' health care experiences with these multi-stakeholder groups can ensure that their efforts truly reflect consumers' needs and priorities, including:

- Making sure patients get good care regardless of their race, gender, ethnicity, and language;
- Improving safety and quality of care;
- Increasing access to information about how well doctors, hospitals, and other health care providers care for patients;
- Improving communication with doctors and other health care providers; and
- Improving patients' understanding of how to manage their health and health care.

The Value Proposition

The majority of non-profit organizations, big and small, are stretched for resources—staff, finances, etc. Dedicating time and resources to any initiative requires thoughtful consideration. Individual volunteers, too, often need to choose between community efforts and decide which ones they will devote their time and energy. There are significant benefits to engaging in the AF4Q initiative, including opportunities to:

- Increase accountability in the health care system and improve patient safety;
- Reduce health care costs;
- Help patients better manage their health and health care;
- Develop relationships, find common ground and work together to create solutions that meet the needs of consumers in your community;
- Improve patients' experiences with the health care system; and
- Eliminate disparities based on race, ethnicity, and language.

For more information about consumer participation in the AF4Q Alliances, contact Jennifer Sweeney at the National Partnership for Women & Families (NPWF) at 202-986-2600 or Jsweeney@nationalpartnership.org

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[i] Asch, S. M.; Kerr, E.; Keesey, J.; Adams, J. L.; Setodji, C. M.; Malik, S. and. E. A. McGlynn, "Who Is at Greatest Risk for Receiving Poor-Quality Health Care?" New England Journal of Medicine, March 16, 2006, 354(11):1147-56

[ii] "National Healthcare Disparities Report, 2008," Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, March 2009. Accessed at http://www.ahrq.gov/qual/nhdr08/nhdr08.pdf.

[iii] "An Agenda for Change" The Dartmouth Institute for Health Policy & Clinical Practice, A Darmouth Atlas Whitepaper, December 2008. Accessed at http://www.dartmouthatlas.org/topics/agenda_for_change.pdf.

[iv] "Why Not The Best? Results From a National Scorecard on U.S. Health System Performance," The Commonwealth Fund Commission on a High Performance Health System, September 20, 2006. Accessed at http://www.commonwealthfund.org/Content/Publications/Fund-Reports/2006/Sep/Why-Not-the-Best--Results-from-a-National-Scorecard-on-U-S--Health-System-Performance.aspx.

[v] "Medical Errors Cost U.S. $8.8 Billion, result in 238,337 potentially preventable deaths, according to HealthGrades Study," Health Grades. Accessed at http://www.healthgrades.com/media/dms/pdf/HealthGradesPatientSafetyRelease2008.pdf.