

Guest Editorial

Consumers Must Drive Quality Health Care

A revolution is working its way slowly but surely through America's health care systems. Like many great revolutions, it is about empowerment and the creation of a new paradigm. It will not happen overnight, but the forces at work are irresistible. It will bring new hope and new responsibilities. The agent of change in this revolution is our long, national quest to improve the quality of health care, and its army is composed of every consumer in the health care market—in other words, every single person reading this article and every single person you see.

Although they are not the ones making the diagnosis and holding the scalpel, consumers will ultimately determine the quality level of their health care. It is time we consider the roots of this revolution, its progress, and what it means for consumers.

Individual consumers are making more health care decisions themselves, a change fueled by the rapid growth of Health Savings Accounts (HSAs). About 17 million people now have an HSA and that number is expected to exceed 29 million within 5 years. A focus on health care quality by millions of individual payers may someday revolutionize our understanding and acceptance of the standard of care we receive.

Today, consumer knowledge about how to ensure high-quality care is low. One reason is that employers, insurers, and government payers have been the de facto guardians of quality on behalf of the consumers they serve. It is time that the same commitment to driving quality improvements by these third parties

be applied to the education of consumers who have the most at stake in their own health.

One empowering theme for each of us to understand is that the more health care consumers know about how quality is measured and what constitutes high-quality care, the more emphasis health care institutions will place on quality. Information and knowledge will fuel the consumer health care quality revolution.

The concept is simple and may best be explained in ways we already understand. I started my career as a public health director in Jefferson County, Alabama. One of my major concerns involved the sanitation standards of the restaurants we inspected. To drive quality improvements, we were one of the first health departments to publish restaurant sanitation ratings in the local newspaper. Once consumers became educated on the process and aware of the quality grade of these restaurants, owners began calling the health department for assistance in improving their grade. While some like to contend that health care is different, the same consumer pressures apply and, more importantly, drive improvements.

The first step, of course, is to define quality for consumers. The Institute of Medicine defines quality care as patient centered, timely, efficient, effective, safe, and equitable. I believe that it is also coordinated, compassionate, and innovative because medicine must continue to innovate if we are to improve the quality of medical care in this nation. Consumers should call on the health care system to provide the information they need to make confident decisions in choosing a physician, a hospital, or a course of treatment. They must insist that health care providers measure and report how well they do their jobs. Information about how well care meets accepted standards must be presented to consumers in a way they can understand and, more importantly, act on.

It is no easy task to define and measure quality, and it will take a consumer revolution to make contin-

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uous quality improvement one of the top priorities of all health care providers. But the same consumer power that ensures your next restaurant meal does not harm you can certainly become the driving force that motivates every health care provider to meet or

exceed the high standards of care we all expect them to deliver.

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