
Strengthening Medicare's Role in Reducing Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities

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Background

- Mission of the National Academy of Social Insurance
- Appointed a diverse study panel
 - Academics
 - Health care practitioners
 - Health plan administrators
 - Executives of health care companies
 - Staff of provider associations or alliances
- Study panel's products: final report, issue briefs, and working papers

The Panel's Charge

- Racial and ethnic disparities in health care and health outcomes have been documented again and again.
- The study panel's goal was to determine how Medicare can help reduce disparities—not only for the program's beneficiaries but throughout the health care system.

Medicare's Role

- Finances care for 43 million beneficiaries, including 9 million minority beneficiaries
- Affects the entire health care system as the largest purchaser and regulator of care
- As a contributory social insurance program, has a responsibility to assure that all beneficiaries receive appropriate care on a fair and nondiscriminatory basis

HHS's Response: A Good Start

- AHRQ Health Disparities Report
- CMS demonstration projects
- Quality Improvement Organizations
- Partnerships with health plans and provider organizations
- Focus on improved data

Panel's Vision

- Equitable access of all Medicare beneficiaries to high-quality health care
- Providers with whom beneficiaries can communicate effectively
- Providers who understand how culture affects health and health care
- Health care that is responsive to individual needs

Recommendations

- Quality of clinical care
- Access to care
- Education of health professionals
- Capability and practice of institutions
- Administrative priorities and structure

Quality and Disparities

- Institute of Medicine and others have argued that using evidence-based guidelines to promote quality will reduce disparities.
- Panel was skeptical of this argument, and evidence for it is mixed
- Some efforts to improve quality may worsen disparities.
- Quality improvement efforts must focus explicitly on reducing disparities.

Quality of Care

- Improve infrastructure available to providers who serve minority beneficiaries
- In structuring incentives for quality, account for differences in population served
- Ensure that beneficiaries have a primary provider of care

Access to Care

- Ensure that minorities are enrolled in programs that supplement Medicare
- Set deductibles and co-payments to reduce disparities
- Provide incentives for providers to locate in underserved urban areas
- Educate beneficiaries and their families on using the health care system

Education of Professionals

- Use Medicare's leverage on graduate medical education
- Require hospitals to report data on the racial/ethnic composition of medical staff
- Encourage and enhance training in cultural competence for providers

Capability and Practice of Institutions

- Collect the data necessary for assessing, monitoring, and targeting disparities
- Strengthen the role of accreditation organizations in reducing disparities
- Improve services for patients with limited English proficiency—interpretive services, proficiency in another language

Administrative Priorities and Structure

- Establish CMS performance goals for the reduction of disparities
- Enhance the organizational structure of CMS to support the reduction of disparities
- Address racial and ethnic disparities as a civil rights and compliance issue

Summary

- Medicare and CMS are beginning to use the substantial number of tools available to the government to help reduce disparities.
- To make significant progress, Medicare needs to use most or all of these tools.
- What is needed: commitment, energy, and additional resources