National Priorities and Goals

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Can 28 major national organizations that collectively influence every part of the health care system really make a difference? That was my question when I first received a report from the National Quality Forum (NQF) in Washington, DC.1 Readers of my previous P&T columns might recall that Americans spend more per capita on health care than any other industrialized country, yet our results in terms of important indicators of quality fall significantly below those of similar nations. Thus, could another executive-level report stress the urgency of the situation or offer a unique solution? I think the NQF and the National Priorities Partnership have done just that.

The NQF has set goals covering six key areas. I will explain how the partnership group intends to get us across the “quality chasm.” These goals are to:

- engage patients and families in managing their own health care,
- improve the health of Americans,
- improve the safety and reliability of health care in the U.S.
- ensure that patients receive coordinated care in all settings,
- guarantee compassionate care for patients at the end of life,
- eliminate the overuse of services, such as unnecessary tests, drugs, and procedures, while ensuring the delivery of appropriate treatment.

1. Managing health care. The importance of getting patients and families involved in decision making about health care has been discussed by the mainstream media. This time, the partners have promised to ensure that all patients have a chance to provide feedback about their experience of care and that they have access to information to help them to make informed decisions about treatments. The report contains examples of how we might make progress in this area.

2. Improving the nation’s health. Communities will promote health and wellness as well as national, state, and local systems of care that are dedicated to preventing disease, injury, and disability. The partnership calls for effective steps to help people reduce the risk and burden of disease. This priority is certainly in evidence at Thomas Jefferson University, which has just launched the Jefferson School of Population Health.

3. Improving the safety of health care. The partnership envisions a system that will reduce the risk of injury while promising reliable health care. Every patient would receive the benefits of medical care based solidly in science. This is a watershed event; it is the first time so many nationally prominent organizations collaborated in the effort to achieve such a lofty goal.

4. Ensuring coordinated care. Patients would receive treatment in all health care settings and at all levels of care. The partnership plans to guide patients and their families through their health care experience while respecting patient choice, offering physical and psychological support, and encouraging strong relationships between patients and their health care providers. The partners promise that their staffs will strive to improve care by soliciting feedback from patients and families about coordinating care during transitions and will work with patients to reduce preventable visits to emergency departments. I believe these are critically important steps, and I’m frankly amazed that all of the organizations were able to agree on this fourth priority.

5. Providing care for patients with life-limiting illnesses. The partnership envisions health care capable of offering dignity, comfort, companionship, and support to patients and families who face advanced illness. This goal is simply staggering. If all of the organizations could succeed in this task, we would be able to eliminate much waste and human suffering. The partners want patients to have access to psychological, social, and spiritual assistance.

6. Eliminating the overuse of resources while delivering good care. The partners have pledged to promote more affordable health care by safely reducing unscientific, inappropriate, and excessive services, such as diagnostic tests, drugs, procedures, doctor visits, and hospital stays. The partners agree that all health care organizations will try to deliver appropriate patient care while reducing extraneous services or treatments. This goal is pretty incredible too; never have so many groups publicly acknowledged that superfluous tests and medications can be expensive, wasteful, and dangerous.

What, then, is the overall vision of the partnership?

In the ideal system, all patients and family members would have more control of their health care and would gain skills in self-care. Such a system would provide total transparency, would be adaptable to individual and family circumstances, and would embrace patients of various cultures, language, and social backgrounds.

This is a turning point in health care in the 21st century. I am very impressed by the work of these nationally prominent organizations that now call themselves partners. I anticipate that with their leadership, we will be able to move this laudable agenda forward. As the founding dean of our new school at Jefferson, I know that we will recommit ourselves to embracing these six priorities, and I hope that we will join with the partners in their quest for immediate progress in attaining these goals.

As always, I’m interested in your views. My e-mail address is david.nash@jefferson.edu. Please visit my blog at http://nashonhealthpolicy.blogspot.com.

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