

Advanced Topics

managed care training manual



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In This Together: Using Patient-Reported Outcome Measures to Enhance the Value of Health Care

By Debra L. Ness and Steven E. Weinberger, MD

The journey toward health care reform has been filled with twists and turns. To us, none has been more unexpected than the perception that patients and the clinicians who provide their health care have different objectives.

In fact, physicians and patients are aligned in their desire for a health care system that provides better, more affordable care for patients and families -- care that results in better health and better quality of life. We all want our health care system to provide high-value care. And, increasingly, we all recognize that only a health care system that is patient- and family-centered, in which clinicians and patients together advance common goals, can work for patients, families, communities and our country.

We must, however, also recognize that in order to achieve this shared goal and create a patient- and family-centered health care system, patients, families and consumers must be an integral part of the process of designing and evaluating that system -- real partners, whose voices are heard and whose perspectives are valued. And in order to really hear patients' voices, we must understand the importance of taking their values, goals and preferences into account and abandon the anachronistic attitude that physicians always know what is best for their patients. In fact, evidence indicates that often what clinicians think is most important to their patients differs from what patients themselves say their health care goals are.¹

It is essential that we recognize and value the unique experience and expertise of patients and families, and that we encourage and listen to what they can tell us. That means going beyond what clinical measures can tell us, and even going beyond what we can learn from "patient experience" measures through which patients provide feedback on specific aspects of the care process.

Patient-reported outcome measures (PROMs) tell us how patients assess the results of the care they've received --how that care has affected their functional status, symptom burden and quality of life.

Importance of Measurement

The only way to ensure that the care we provide is meeting the needs of patients, is aligned with their preferences, and is helping them attain their health goals is to elicit their perspectives as to whether we are providing quality care that helps them achieve their goals and enhance their quality of life. It is time to make patient-reported feedback about the impact and value of the care we provide paramount.

This kind of measurement is essential to helping us improve quality and outcomes, supporting informed patient/consumer decision-making, and ensuring that we have a payment system that incentivizes and rewards high-value care. Done right, it can tell us how we are doing, whether we are using our health care resources effectively and, most importantly, how we can improve.

Patient-Reported Outcomes Measurement

PROMs are an especially important way for us to hear directly from patients about how we are doing. They reflect the changes in people's physical and/or mental health status, including their ability to perform normal household functions and job duties, as a result of medical treatments and procedures they have received.^{2,3}

PROMs can elicit information from patients and family members about patients' functional status and quality of life -- whether they can engage in the things they enjoy and that are most important to them, and the impact of care on their emotional and cognitive status.

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PROMs are typically derived from standardized patient survey instruments, such as those already created for asthma, depression, back pain, and many other conditions.⁴ They are a key barometer for measuring how we are doing in terms of meeting patients' needs and providing the kind of care and support that matters most to them.

This kind of rich input about the real-life impact of care on patients' health and lives can also provide clinicians with valuable information about how well they are understanding and communicating with patients. It can help foster improvements in shared care planning, goal-setting and decision-making, including during end-of-life care. Better communication and shared care planning can, in turn, help patients and families better engage in their own care and health management.

This is especially important for complex patients with multiple chronic conditions because for them, we need to do more than test whether glucose levels or range of motion, for instance, are improving. We need measures that provide a complete picture of how the patient is doing. As our population ages, and we have more complex patients in the system, this becomes even more essential.

Information from PROMs is not just important for clinicians. Measures built from this information are quite meaningful to patients, families and consumers and can help them make more informed decisions about where to get their care and what treatment options they want to pursue.

Likewise for payers, who can use PROMs to ensure that they are paying for care that produces the best results and most effective use of health care dollars. Finally, the information from PROMs will be essential to knowing whether new payment and delivery models are delivering high-value care as defined by patients, families and consumers -- care that not only lowers costs but also produces the better health and better care system we all want to achieve.

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Overcoming Barriers

So what is standing in the way of widespread adoption of PROMs?

Many stakeholders recognize them as important, but our health care system as a whole has been slow to adopt them. Despite some successful examples of PROM initiatives, we still lack a serious commitment by all payers and providers to develop, implement and report these essential measures.

Many stakeholders recognize them as important, but our health care system as a whole has been slow to adopt them. Despite some successful examples of PROM initiatives, we still lack a serious commitment by all payers and providers to develop, implement and report these essential measures.

Such commitment will require investment not just in the development of PROMs, but also in ensuring that these measures can be collected efficiently and that the data collection process itself can be integrated as seamlessly as possible into clinical workflow. Currently, PROMs often rely on lengthy surveys, administered before and after care, and can be burdensome to both patients and clinicians.⁵

We need additional study on the best ways to integrate these measures into clinical workflow ... and, very importantly, we need an electronic information infrastructure that facilitates efficient and timely collection of patient-reported outcome (PRO) data. We should ultimately be able to collect patient-reported data through registries and patient portals, and integrate it into patients' electronic health records (EHRs).^{6,7}

We also need to incentivize and learn from wider use of the effective PRO measures that already exist (e.g. asthma control, depression remission, joint replacement).

This will require that professional societies and clinicians be willing to standardize the surveys that are used, as well as the processes for calculating the change in a patient's health status that produces the actual measure.⁸

Most importantly, we need a serious and concerted push from all payers -- public and private -- to prioritize and incentivize the use of these measures in all value-based payment and care models. PROMs should ultimately become important metrics for telling us whether new approaches to payment and new models of care are genuinely helping us achieve the Triple Aim -- whether these new models are providing better care that results in better health from the perspective of the patients and families they are intended to serve.⁹

Payers, providers, and patient/consumer advocates will need to work with those who design information technology to ensure we have the needed systems to collect, analyze and integrate this data. Payers will need to ensure that clinicians have the necessary resources, tools, and payment incentives to foster effective collection and use of these measures. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services and other payers should, in particular, recognize and reward clinicians' work to develop and implement PROMs as an essential dimension of clinical quality improvement. And patient/consumer advocates should be involved as partners in every aspect of this process.

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Conclusion

Patients and clinicians are in this together. A health care system that provides better, more affordable care, that helps all individuals and communities achieve better health, is a goal we share. To achieve this goal, we must value the feedback and amplify the voices of the patients, families, and communities our health care system serves. Making sure the use of PROMs is central to how we assess the value of the health care services we provide is an essential step in this direction.

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9. See note 2.