Patient-Centered Care: "It's the Patient, Stupid!"

In its landmark 2001 report on *Crossing the Quality Chasm*, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) named "patient-centered care" as one of the six fundamental aims of the U.S. health care system. The IOM defines patient-centered care as:

> *"Health care that establishes a partnership among practitioners, patients, and their families (when appropriate) to ensure that decisions respect patients' wants, needs, and preferences and that patients have the education and support they need to make decisions and participate in their own care."*

Studies show that orienting health care around the preferences and needs of patients has the potential to improve patients' satisfaction with their care as well as their clinical outcomes; patient-centeredness also been shown to reduce both under-use and over-use of medical services. Yet, according to a recent Commonwealth Fund survey of patients in five countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and the U.S.), one-third of sick patients in the U.S. leave the doctor's office without getting answers to important questions. And across all countries in the study, one-third to one-half of respondents said their doctors sometimes, rarely, or never tell them about treatment options or involve them in making decisions about their care.

Increasingly, patients are asking to be partners in their care. A patient-centered health system can help achieve that partnership through improved provider–patient communication and educational materials and self-management tools that enable patients to make informed decisions and better manage their conditions. Other attributes of a patient-centered care system include superb access to care (such as timely appointments and after-hours services), continuity of care between primary and specialist physicians, post-hospital follow-up and support, effective management of drug regimens and chronic conditions, and use of information technology, such as automated patient reminders and patient access to electronic medical records. Giving patients access to reliable information about the cost and quality of physicians, hospitals, and other health care providers is also an essential step toward creating a patient-centered care system.

In this issue of *Value-Based Purchasing*, we focus on the growing role of employers in helping to activate and engage their employees in the selection, use, and payment of health care services. Employer leadership is critical to driving the health care system toward greater patient-centeredness, by helping to create both the information and incentives that will motivate consumers to assume greater responsibility for their care. Informed and engaged consumers can in turn motivate providers to achieve higher levels of quality and patient-centeredness.

The emerging era of "consumerism" in health care means more than just asking employees to pay a greater share of the bill. While increased sensitivity to cost is important, employers must go beyond a simple cost-shifting strategy to provide

educational programs and tools that truly empower individuals to become more informed decision-makers in their care. As described in one of this issue's feature articles, the City of Knoxville has pioneered several innovative programs designed to engage public employees in prevention and healthy lifestyles. This program demonstrates that employers can become meaningful partners with their employees by helping them focus on behaviors that are fundamental to personal health, and which also confer cost savings for the organization as a whole.

In a review of evidence related to the effectiveness of consumer-directed health plans, University of Minnesota researcher Steve Parente notes the failure of many CDHP products to make the cost implications of health care spending readily transparent to consumers. Without providing timely access to cost information related to their health savings accounts, employers can't expect enrollees in CDHP products to become better shoppers. We would add that it is equally important to include quality information as well as cost, to enable employees to discern value in their health care decisions.

Health care providers are increasingly discovering that achieving excellence in service to patients and their families is a key not only to outstanding clinical outcomes, but to a successful business enterprise as well. Purchasers can reinforce this message by rewarding providers who deliver excellence in both clinical and service quality, through benefit programs that educate and provide incentives to employees to become responsible partners in the health care delivery process. After all, when you come right down to it, it really should be all about the patient.