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Prescriptions for Excellence in
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National Priorities Partnership: Setting a National Agenda for Health Care Quality and Safety

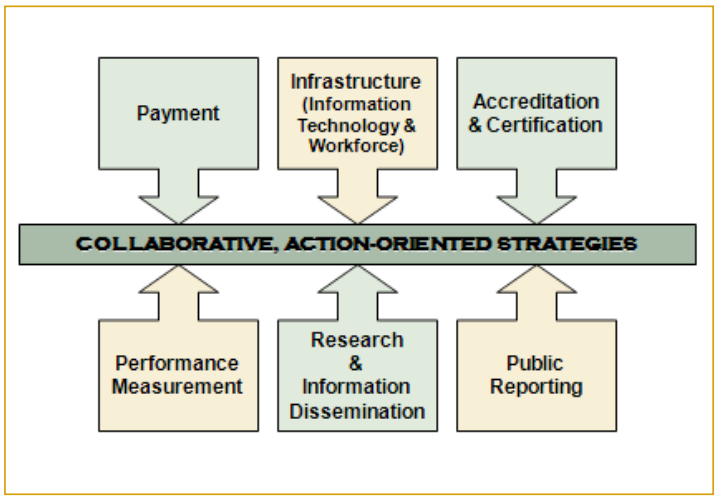
By Karen Adams, PhD

In recent years, many individuals and organizations have made great strides toward improving the quality, efficiency, and safety of care delivered to patients—but most have not come to grips with the level of structural and systemic change required to produce the dramatic improvements in health and health care that are critical to achieve sustainable reform. Most Americans do not benefit from the growing evidence base because, too often, "best practices" are not disseminated. The health care system's skyrocketing costs, questioned value, and persistent disparities still exist. Breakthrough change requires focused commitment from all stakeholders.

To meet these challenges, the National Quality Forum convened the National Priorities Partnership (NPP) in November 2008. NPP is a collaborative effort of 32 organizations representing those who give, receive, pay for, and evaluate health care. The Partners influence every part of the health care system and are working toward transformational change to ensure that all patients have access to a high-performing, high-value health care system.

As a first step, the Partners set National Priorities and Goals for improvement. The Partners agreed that efforts targeting the quality, safety, and efficiency of care should move forward in a more coordinated fashion with the focus on the collective whole rather than the individual parts. As a result, the National Priorities and Goals all contribute to eliminating harm, eradicating disparities, removing waste, and improving the delivery of care. The Priority areas address care coordination, overuse, palliative and end-of-life care, patient and family engagement, population health, and safety.

Now, the Partners are working to align the drivers of change around the National Priorities and Goals. There are a handful of extremely effective mechanisms that can truly spur change in the health care system: performance measurement, public reporting, payment systems, research and knowledge dissemination, professional development, and system capacity. The Partners are working with policy makers, health care leaders, and the community at large to build on the NPP framework (Figure 1) and ensure that the necessary improvements are made.



Care Coordination. By 2020, an estimated 157 million Americans will be grappling with at least 1 chronic condition.[1] They will require personalized attention and seamless transitions from one care setting to another; many will suffer due to a lack of communication with or between providers. The Partners envision health care organizations that solicit and carefully consider feedback from all patients, and that communicate clear medication and other health information to patients, family members, and the next health care professional to provide care. Additionally, Partner organizations across multiple settings of care will work collaboratively with patients to reduce 30-day readmission rates and preventable emergency department visits.

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Overuse. Reducing waste and ensuring that all patients receive appropriate care, especially preventive services, can result in dramatic improvements in health care efficiency and effectiveness. The Partners envision health care organizations that will strive to improve the delivery of appropriate patient care, and substantially and measurably reduce extraneous services such as inappropriate medication use; unnecessary laboratory tests and consultations; unwarranted diagnostic procedures, maternity care interventions, and inappropriate non-palliative services at end of life; potentially harmful preventive services with no benefit; and preventable emergency department visits and hospitalizations.

Palliative and End-of-Life Care. More than 1 million people die each year without access to hospice and palliative care services and without care that takes into account their physical, social, and spiritual needs.[2] These patients also may endure prolonged and needless suffering and costly or ineffective treatments. Evidence suggests that patients who are enrolled in palliative care programs are more satisfied with their care and have better outcomes in addition to the cost savings.[3] The Partners envision a health care system in which all patients with life-limiting illnesses will have access to effective treatment for relief of suffering; help with psychological, social, and spiritual needs; and will receive effective communication from health care professionals about their diagnoses, options for treatment, and high-quality palliative care and hospice services.

Patient and Family Engagement. Often, patients are not asked how they want to be treated or for feedback about their experiences. They may not feel adequately informed or involved in decisions about their care. They frequently do not understand the important information health care professionals discuss with them, and they often lack the knowledge or support to maintain and improve their health. Engaging patients as active partners in their care can lead to better health outcomes, lower service utilization, and lower costs.[4]

Population Health. Inconsistent preventive services and poor lifestyle behavior choices have led to a shocking decline in our national health, threatening both individual lives and America's economic prosperity. In fact, nearly half of all adults in the United States do not receive appropriate screening and preventive care.[5] The Partners are working to ensure that all Americans receive the most effective preventive services recommended by the US Preventive Services Task Force and adopt the most important healthy lifestyle behaviors known to promote health. The goal is for healthier communities according to a national index of health.

Safety. Every year more people die as a result of avoidable medical errors than from car accidents, breast cancer, or AIDS. While quality and safety vary from organization to organization, few patients have access to performance information and data with which to choose the most appropriate health care organization. Too often, consumers are constrained by geography, health plan provider networks, and cost. The Partners will endeavor to ensure that all health care organizations and their staff will strive for a culture of safety while working to lower the incidence of health care-induced harm, including all health care-associated infections and serious adverse events.

Putting It All Together

There are emerging synergies between President Obama's plan for health reform and NPP's Priorities and Goals, which should provide momentum to achieve reform. For example, the President's plan includes investing in public health measures to reduce obesity, sedentary lifestyles, and smoking, as well as guaranteeing access to preventive services.

Current reform proposals also call for continued efforts to improve patient safety and end-of-life care, and to reduce waste and inefficiencies in health care. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 includes funding for health information technology, which has the potential to greatly improve efforts in care coordination. Significant funding for comparative effectiveness research, if aligned with the Priorities and Goals, could further the evidence base needed to help providers improve patient care.

In April 2009, the Senate Finance Committee proposed policy options to improve patient care and reduce health care costs, including a reduction of payments to hospitals with high readmission rates for select conditions. Recently, the NPP Priority areas were used to create the framework for "meaningful use" of an electronic health record as outlined by the Department of Health and Human Services' Health Information Technology Policy Committee.

The Partners share a sense of urgency and believe that repairing the broken health care system should, and will soon be, a top national priority. They believe that solving this complex and costly crisis will require nonpartisan leadership from public and private sectors, and a commitment to work cooperatively to translate this agenda into action and achieve these goals that will vastly improve the health care delivery system.

To learn more about the National Priorities Partnership and download the November 2008 report *National Priorities & Goals: Aligning Our Efforts to Transform America's Healthcare*, please visit http://www.nationalprioritiespartnership.org.

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