From Health Policy to Population Health: Impressions and Highlights of Recent Conferences

As program director for both the health policy and population health programs at the Jefferson College of Population Health, I look at the health landscape from two distinct vantage points. Health policy pulls back the curtain on the levers and mechanisms that govern the allocation of societal resources, the influence of public opinion and private interests, and the various junctures where change can and does occur. Population health is an expression of the more parochial interests of health care systems and providers searching for ways to improve health outcomes and reduce costs for the patients and communities they serve.

This duality in perspective to health was made plain to me after attending two important, but very different, meetings — the AcademyHealth National Health Policy Conference in Washington, DC and the Institute for Healthcare Improvement’s (IHI) Leading Population Health Transformation Seminar in San Diego. I realized that we must reconcile the differences between these worlds and find ways to bring them together.

First, I’d like to share highlights from AcademyHealth’s policy conference. It’s clear to anyone not living off the grid or in a cave that health policy is undergoing rapid and extraordinary change. The recent election has made plain to me after attending two important, but very different, meetings — the AcademyHealth National Health Policy Conference in Washington, DC and the Institute for Healthcare Improvement’s (IHI) Leading Population Health Transformation Seminar in San Diego. I realized that we must reconcile the differences between these worlds and find ways to bring them together.

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The IHI Population Health Transformation seminar program was a more intimate affair. Saranya Loehrer, MD, MPH, Head of the North America Region for IHI, and her team of seasoned health system administrators guided a group of health system professionals through a deep exploration of state-of-the-art population health practice. This was truly population health at the ground level.

Featured speakers, George Kerwin, President and CEO of Bellin Health Systems in Wisconsin; Al Kurose, MD, MBA, FACP, President and CEO of Coastal Medical in Rhode Island; Helen Macfie, PharmD, Chief Transformation Officer for MemorialCare Health System in Southern California; and L. Gordon Moore, MD, Senior Medical Director of Population and Provider Solutions for 3M Health Information Systems shared stories of how to navigate the complex path from volume to value. They highlighted specific applications and development of detailed action plans. For this audience of health system administrators and leaders, finances were a key part of the discussion as everyone was searching for ways to show the return for their investments in new people and technology. Data — how to analyze, apply and use it — was an important underlying theme, as well as how to engage community partners in population health initiatives that focus on keeping attributed patients healthy and out of the emergency department and hospital bed.

The folks in DC have much to learn from what’s happening out in the real world. The ACA, MACRA and other health laws have launched an unstoppable revolution that has radically changed how we will deliver health care in the future. The population health lessons learned from innovative health systems like those featured at the IHI Health Transformation seminar should be used to inform national health policymaking. Even if they aren’t, the folks in DC must recognize that the movement toward population health is unstoppable. The nation is holding health systems accountable for the health of the populations they serve like never before. There is no going back.

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