

Panel Seeks Public's Ideas For Health Care Reform

BY NELLIE BRISTOL
Contributing Writer

WASHINGTON — American health care could be in for the world's largest customer satisfaction survey as the U.S. Citizens' Health Care Working Group seeks comments nationwide on how to reform the system.

"In order to make health care work for all Americans, we need to hear from all Americans," said working group member Rosario Perez, a registered nurse and vice president of Mission Integration and Outreach Services for CHRISTUS Santa Rosa Health Care in San Antonio. "We want to hear from individuals across the country. That means your parents, your relatives, your coworkers, and people in your community." Perez spoke at a briefing sponsored by the Citizen's Health Care Working Group.

Established by the 2003 Medicare Modernization Act, the 14-member panel will collect as many comments and suggestions as possible before April 15. Submissions will serve as the basis for panel recommendations for Congress and President Bush to consider next spring. The recommendations will address costs, care affordability, and quality improvement.

"Despite increases in medical care spending that are greater than the rate of inflation, population growth, and Gross Domestic Product growth, there has not been a commensurate improvement in our health status as a nation," according to the law that established the working group.

Among areas of interest highlighted by the working group are consumer concerns about health care delivery, benefits that should be provided, how health care should be paid for, and acceptable trade-offs to ensure broad access to services.

Comments from the public will be collected via the group's Web site (www.citizenshealthcare.gov) and through "town hall"-style community meetings planned for every state.

The effort is the bipartisan brainchild of Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) and Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.).

The press briefing was held in the same Senate room as the 1912 hearings on the sinking of the Titanic, and Sen. Wyden said the U.S. health care system could suffer a similar dire fate "if something dramatic isn't done to save it."

Sen. Wyden suggested citizen input may engender systemic change that has stymied Congress for the last 6 decades. A "citizens' road map" for change could help "overcome the feeding frenzy by special interests," he argued.

The panel is made up of health care professionals, economists, benefits experts, and advocates from across the country, and includes Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt. The group is chaired by Randall L. Johnson, head of corporate benefits for Motorola Inc.; vice chair is Catherine McLaughlin, Ph.D., a health economist at the University of Michigan.

To jump start the national discussion, the group developed a 30-page "Health Report to the American People," which summarizes the current state of U.S. health care.

"Having this information prepares us as a country to ask some tough questions about whether we are getting the services we need and want, [and] whether we are getting our money's worth and choices we need and are willing to make to have health [access] for all Americans," said Dr. McLaughlin.

She said that the working group aims to develop recommendations that would address health care as a whole. "Our health care system is a lot like our natural environment, an ecosystem in which any significant change in one area has ripple effects throughout the others," she said. "We need to address the entire health care system, not just specific problems like cost, quality, or access—no matter how urgent they may seem from our different perspectives." ■

POLICY & PRACTICE

More on Drug-Only Treatment

The number of patients entering treatment for both alcohol and drug abuse problems has declined, but the number of patients getting substance abuse treatment alone has increased, according to data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The National Survey of Substance Abuse Treatment Services: 2004 found that of the 1.07 million people enrolled in substance abuse treatment on March 31, 2004, 46% were receiving both drug and alcohol abuse treatment, down from 49% in 1998. Another 34% were in treatment for drug abuse alone, up from 27% in 1998, while 20% were in treatment only for alcohol abuse, down from 24% in 1998. "These data will assist SAMHSA and state and local governments assess the nature and extent of service provided in state-supported and other treatment facilities, and forecast treatment resource requirements," said SAMHSA Administrator Charles Curie.

Autism and Genetics

Five institutes at the National Institutes of Health and three private organizations have formed a consortium to identify genes that may contribute to the development of autism and autism spectrum disorders. The consortium has funded five grants totaling \$10.8 million, to be given out over a 5-year period. "This initiative seeks to expand our knowledge of the genetic factors involved in this disorder that affects so many families," said Thomas R. Insel, director of the National Institute of Mental Health, one of the consortium members. The other members from NIH are the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. The private organizations are the National Alliance for Autism Research, Cure Autism Now, and the Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center.

Schizophrenia Research Forum

The National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia and Depression (NARSAD) has introduced the Schizophrenia Research Forum, an Internet site that allows researchers to discuss new findings on schizophrenia and related disorders, as well as check out online resources and share reagents and other specialized lab materials. The site, which can be found online at www.schizophreniaforum.org, is sponsored by NARSAD and supported by the National Institute of Mental Health. "Committed scientists may be able to establish communal resources, but the advantage of a virtual community like SRF is its staying power," said William T. Carpenter Jr., M.D., director of the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center and a member of the

site's advisory board. "SRF's professional staff ensures that . . . the site won't drift away as laboratory staffs and their priorities change."

Imaging Accreditation

The Intersocietal Commission for the Accreditation of Magnetic Resonance Laboratories (ICAMRL) has expanded its program to include accreditation for body, cardiovascular, musculoskeletal, and neurologic imaging. The revised accreditation process, which went into effect Nov. 1, was instituted because of widespread interest from neurologists, cardiologists, orthopedic surgeons, radiologists, and others. "It is crucial to the future of this imaging modality that all specialties have access to a fair and equitable accreditation program that enables them to receive peer-review of their work and to document to insurers that they are providing quality magnetic resonance studies consistent with established clinical guidelines," ICAMRL President Edward T. Martin, M.D., said in a statement. Labs can apply in any or all of the specialty areas. In addition, the ICAMRL process enables labs using extremity-only magnets to apply for accreditation.

HHS Mulls Investigation

The Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Inspector General is looking into the circumstances surrounding the resignation of former Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Lester M. Crawford, D.V.M., Ph.D., to determine whether an investigation should be opened, an OIG spokeswoman said. In a response to a query from Rep. Maurice Hinchey (D-N.Y.), HHS Inspector General Daniel R. Levinson said the OIG is doing an initial review of the facts, not an investigation in any regulatory sense, according to the spokeswoman. "After reviewing the facts, the OIG will determine if an investigation is formally launched," she said. "Dr. Crawford's departure, a mere 2 months after confirmation to his position, raises significant questions," Rep. Hinchey and several fellow members of Congress wrote in their request. Dr. Crawford had resigned his position after a 30-year career with the agency, serving as its deputy commissioner and director of the Center for Veterinary Medicine, among other posts.

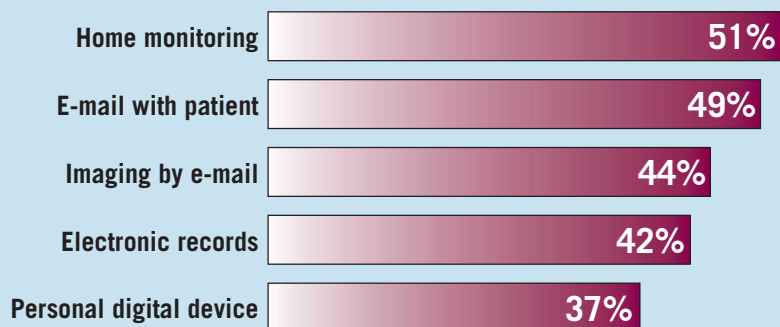
Alternative Medicine Centers

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine is funding five new research centers to study complementary and alternative approaches to HIV/AIDS, arthritis, asthma, and pain. Three of the new centers will focus on therapies used in traditional Chinese medicine, such as acupuncture and Chinese herbal mixtures. The other centers will study millimeter wave therapy—a type of energy medicine—and botanical therapies used by traditional healers in Africa.

—Joyce Frieden

DATA WATCH

Many Patients 'Strongly Favor' Physicians' Use of New Medical Technologies



Note: Based on a nationwide survey of 2,048 adults conducted Sept. 30 to Oct. 4, 2005.
Sources: The Wall Street Journal Online, Harris Interactive