

Thursday, March 16, 2006

Health study finds that "we all get equally mediocre care"

By Jeff Donn, *The Associated Press*

BOSTON — Research from the biggest study ever of U.S. health-care quality suggests that Americans, regardless of their race, income, education or insurance status, get roughly equal treatment once they get into the health-care system — but that treatment is woefully mediocre for all.

"This study shows that health care has equal-opportunity defects," said Dr. Donald Berwick, head of the nonprofit Institute for Healthcare Improvement in Cambridge, Mass., who was not involved in the study.

The survey of nearly 7,000 patients, reported today in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, considered only people in urban areas who sought treatment, but it still challenged some stereotypes: Blacks and Hispanics in the study actually received slightly better medical treatment than whites.

On the other hand, the findings don't counter previous studies that found wide disparities in access to health care for minorities and low-income people.

While researchers who conducted the newest study acknowledged separate evidence that minorities fare worse in some areas of expensive care and suffer more from some conditions than whites, their study found that once in treatment, minorities' overall care appears similar to that of whites.

"It doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter whether you're rich or poor, white or black, insured or uninsured," said Dr. Steven Asch, who helped conduct the study for the Rand Health research institute in Santa Monica, Calif. "We all get equally mediocre care."

The researchers examined medical records and phone interviews from 6,712 randomly picked patients who visited a medical office within a two-year period in 12 metropolitan areas from Boston to Miami to Seattle. The group was not nationally representative but does convey a broad picture of the country's health-care practices.

The survey examined whether people got the highest standard of treatment for 439 measures ranging across common chronic and acute conditions and disease prevention. It looked at whether they got the right tests, drugs and treatments.

Survey reveals poor U.S. health care

6,712 patients were monitored to determine if they received the highest standard treatment for 439 indicators, ranging from common chronic and acute conditions to disease prevention.

Percentage of top-quality health care these groups received



About this survey: Taken between October 1998 and August 2000 in 12 metropolitan areas from Boston to Miami to Seattle.

Source: *New England Journal of Medicine*

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Seattle Times

Overall, patients received only 55 percent of recommended steps for top-quality care — and no group did much better or worse than that. A well-functioning health-care system should provide recommended levels of care 80 to 90 percent of the time, the study's authors said.

Asch blamed the nation's "fragmented and chaotic" health-care system for making it difficult to deliver quality care. Greater use of computers could improve care by helping doctors track patients' medical histories, he said. In addition, computers could provide electronic reminders about needed tests and appointments. Electronic medical records could log information on other caregivers' thoughts about a patient's condition.

Blacks and Hispanics as a group each got 58 percent of the best care, compared with 54 percent for whites. Those with annual household income above \$50,000 got 57 percent, four points more than people from households of less than \$15,000. Patients without insurance got 54 percent of recommended steps, just one point less than those with managed care.

As to gender, women came out slightly ahead at 57 percent, compared with 52 percent for men. Young adults did slightly better than the elderly.

"Though we are improving, disparities in health care still exist," said Dr. Garth Graham, director of the U.S. Office of Minority Health.

Graham noted other data showing enduring inequality in care, including a large federal study last year. He also said minorities go without treatment more often than whites, and that such people are missed entirely by this survey.

Asch said of the new data: "We know African Americans and poor people are less likely to get in the door of the system. And we also know that poor people and African Americans have worse health than white people. What this shows is those differences appear not to be due to the bread-and-butter medical care they receive."

Some experts took heart in the relative equality within the survey. "The study did find some reassuring things," said Dr. Tim Carey, who runs a health-service research center at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

But all health experts interviewed fretted about the uniformly low standard.

"Regardless of who you are or what group you're in, there is a significant gap between the care you deserve and the care you receive," said Dr. Reed Tuckson, a vice president of United HealthGroup, which runs health plans and sells medical data.

Material from The Washington Post and Knight Ridder Newspapers is included in this report.