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Ideas, Information, and Perspectives In
the New Health Care World

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"Now, we're asking consumers to "take responsibility" to help fix our health care cost crisis"

Health Care Literacy- We're Confused

It wasn't too long ago that HMOs entered the market as the new savior to fix our growing health care cost crisis. HMO sales reps blanketed the health care landscape with the promises of "no co-pays, no deductibles, and you'll never see a bill." Consumers didn't need to be engaged. As long as they followed the directions of their primary care doctor, health care was cheap (low co-pays), covered more services, and was painless most of the time (except for the pesky "gatekeeper"). A significant portion of the insured population moved to this new idea in a relatively short period of time.

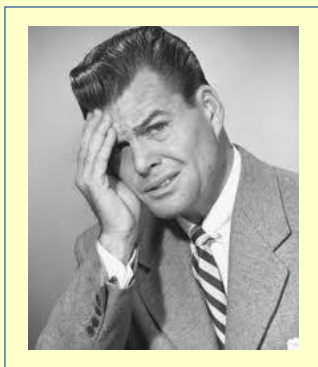
How things have changed. HMOs helped a little but they didn't solve the cost problem. Consumers didn't like the gatekeeper or the medical management arrangements. Most of the legacy HMOs have merged, melded, or changed. Now, we're asking consumers to "take responsibility" to help fix our health care cost crisis. Now we're asking them to get engaged. Consumers are now funding a lot more of their medical expenses than in the early HMO days. They are now expected to navigate a very complex and demanding health care structure on their own. They are being asked to "get healthy" and quit contributing to the escalating costs. And, they are expected to do this with an industry that hasn't always scored stellar ratings in the trust and communication categories.

Less than 25% of the population understands the health care system today¹. This number will likely go down substantially with the implementation of the recent health reform legislation. This lack of understanding adds real costs and inefficiencies to an already costly system (not to mention the significant and avoidable emotional cost that goes along with it).

Improving the "health care literacy" of our population is going to be a critical component to changing the trajectory we are on today. Participants are going to need to know what they are expected to do. Health care is going to need to communicate more clearly than it ever has if the consumer is ever going to get engaged and make the decisions they will need to make. You can write all of the laws you want, but if we're ever going to solve the cost problem we have in health care, it is going to need to communicate better than it does today so all stakeholders understand the roles they are expected to play.

Trying To Change A Health Care System Most Don't Even Understand

“Over 300 studies have shown that health information cannot be understood by most people for whom it was intended.”



We haven't made health care easy to understand.

Health literacy is defined as the “capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.”² It includes all of the many interactions individuals have with health care from researching an illness, to understanding and financing health benefits, to selecting and engaging a health care professional or facility, to following the directions/orders that are prescribed.

Today, 90 million people (nearly half of the adult population) have difficulty understanding and acting on basic health and health care information.³ The health care system hasn't made it easy because it tends to communicate with itself on a whole different level than with the rest of the world. Over 300 studies have shown that health information cannot be understood by most people for whom it was intended.⁴ The system we have developed in this country requires a unique combination of communication and relationship skills to meet the needs of multiple stakeholders; health plans to clinicians, clinicians to clinicians, everybody to the consumer, etc. Unfortunately, health care does a better job communicating with some stakeholders than others and could use some improvement communicating across the board. No doubt, taking a complex and many times emotional topic and breaking it down into understandable and relevant bites is a challenge.

While health care will certainly argue that it is doing all it can, the way we're doing it today only adds avoidable costs (personally and financially) to an already bloated system. In 2007, limited health literacy (including understanding how it all works) cost the health care system somewhere between \$106 and \$238 billion.⁵ This doesn't include all of the emotional costs that are part of the equation. That's no small amount when considering all of the cost and efficiency challenges we are facing today.

And, these costs are before health care reform. We will be adding millions of new “customers” with a variety of learning capabilities and demographics into the health care system. Basic education and relevant communication from a trusted and reliable source will be critical to integrating this group into the confusing and demanding processes we are using today.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act contains a few provisions to try to get health care to start talking from the same page. The Act includes establishing minimum requirements when communicating with consumers, standardizing some terms, and putting a lot of money into the state ombudsmen programs and some other service additions. These efforts may help to develop some consistency with some of the words used and providing another resource to go to when things don't work the way they should- but, we wonder how much impact they will have on improving the basic understanding of the average individual. We need a cultural change as well as a transactional change in how the system communicates.

Continued on the next page

Trying to Change (continued from page 2)

In May, 2010 the Department of Health released its National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy. The National Action Plan states “too often there exists a chasm of knowledge between what professionals know and what patients and consumers understand.”⁶The document goes on to identify 5 key areas that impact the “health literacy” of a population⁷:

1. The communication skills of lay people and professionals
2. The knowledge of lay people and professionals
3. The culture
4. The demands of the health care and public health systems
5. The demands of the situation/context

When viewed in this context it is no wonder most individuals are confused when they have to deal with the health care system we have today. Communication skills are lacking, knowledge of lay people needs to improve, we have a very demanding health care system with high expectations of all involved, and we usually access our health care system during demanding times.

“Only 12% of the English Speaking population was determined to be proficient in understanding the health information provided today”

The 2007 Progress Review of Healthy People 2010 indicated that while we recognize the low levels of health literacy as a problem (actually a public health problem), our efforts to improve the understanding of health care and health information still have a long ways to go. Only 12% of the English speaking population was determined to be “proficient” in understanding the health information provided today⁸. A teacher in a classroom wouldn’t be pleased with these results- and neither should our health care system.

Improving the health literacy of our population is an essential component to begin to fix the expensive system we have today. The best strategy can be boiled down to the idea put forward by Henry David Thoreau many years ago, “Simplify, simplify, simplify.”

Health care reform is going to make an already confusing health care system even more confusing. While all of the new ideas of incentives, new web sites, common terms, branding approaches, and other strategies may help in directing people to doing the right thing in the short term, getting the population really engaged is going to require establishing new relationships between all stakeholders; and they need to talk together better than they have in the past.

The Surgeon General has stated, “health literacy can save lives, save money, and improve the health and well being of millions of Americans.”⁹ This should be the fundamental goal of everything we do in health care today. And, while health care will likely throw this health literacy effort into a quantifiable and project-oriented approach that is more complex than it needs to be, it also needs to realize that improving health literacy and understanding is personal. It is about establishing a new relationship with the individual consumer- a relationship that includes trust, relevance, simplicity, openness, and value.

No small task considering where we are today.

National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy- The Goals

In May, 2010 the Department of Health and Human Services released its action plan to improve the understanding of health care and health care information in the country. The action plan was the result of a significant collaboration between multiple stakeholders in health care and identified seven primary goals to improve from where we are today. We all know the confusion that exists today is costly in many respects. We also know that developing a plan and doing something with it are two totally different things. Let's hope all stakeholders do their part to improve the communication and relationships in health care to make these goals a reality.

1. Develop and disseminate health and safety information that is accurate, accessible, and actionable
2. Promote changes in the health care system that improve health information, communication, informed decision making, and access to health services
3. Incorporate accurate, standards-based, and developmentally appropriate health and science information and curricula in child care and education through the university level
4. Support and expand local efforts to provide adult education, English language instruction, and culturally and linguistically appropriate health information services in the community
5. Build partnerships, develop guidelines, and change policies
6. Increase basic research and the development, implementation, and evaluation of practices and interventions to improve health literacy
7. Increase the dissemination and use of evidence-based health literacy practices and interventions

Source: National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy; US Department of Health and Human Services; 2010

Sources This Month

- 1 2010 Survey of Health Care Consumers; Key Findings, Strategic Implications; Deloitte Center for Health Solutions; 2010
- 2 HealthyPeople 2010
- 3 Health Literacy- A Prescription to End Confusion; Institutes of Medicine; 2004
- 4 IBID
- 5 Low Health Literacy; Implications for National Health Policy; Vernon, Trujilo, Rosenbaun, De Buono; 2007
- 6 National Action Plan To Improve Health Literacy; Department of Health and Human Service; 2010
- 7 IBID
- 8 Progress Review; Health Communications; HealthyPeople 2010; Department of Health and Human Services; 2007
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Something To Think About

“Communication is something so simple and so difficult that we can never put it in simple words”

Thomas S. Mathews

“The greatest problem of communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished”

George Bernard Shaw

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