Health Care Accountability: The Role of Performance Measurement

Friday, February 11, 2005 – The demand for greater accountability in the health care system has focused new attention on measuring its performance and making the results public.

Public Reporting of Performance Measures in Health Care, by Kathleen Morris and Jennifer Zelmer, of the Canadian Institute for Health Information, is the latest in CPRN's *Health Care Accountability Papers* series. It explores examples of public reporting in Canada and abroad. The authors review the objectives underlying performance reporting and what we know and don't know about its effectiveness. They go on to earmark lessons of relevance to future reporting initiatives.

Their paper considers reports that target the public directly, as well as reports aimed at administrators, clinicians, policy makers and others that are also made public. It focuses on reporting of standardized performance indicators – "a performance indicator is a single summary measure, most often expressed in quantitative terms, that represents a key dimension of health status, the health care system, or related factors."

Is public reporting effective?

"Apart from its informational/educational role," says co-author Jennifer Zelmer, "public reporting is effective if it causes someone to act – or to consider acting – to improve quality or performance."

More specifically, the authors find:

- Public reporting is increasingly common in Canada and abroad. The audiences for these reports, the incentives that motivate them, and their ability to respond to performance information vary greatly.
- Outside the U.S., reporting efforts focus mainly on accountability to citizens and motivating improvement in the quality and efficiency of health care delivery, rather than informing consumers' choices.
- While studies show that the public is increasingly aware of at least some reporting efforts and is making more use of on-line reports, there is limited evidence on how this information influences an individual's selection of a clinician, health care facility, or health insurance plan.
- Research has shown that health care organizations respond to publicly released data and take specific actions to improve the quality of care.

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Morris and Zelmer also identify key lessons that developers of future performance reporting initiatives might consider:

- Clear objectives aid design, implementation and evaluation.
- Identifying the target audience for the report will determine the type of data required for the decisions they are expected to make.
- Communication of the results will need to be tailored to the intended audiences. Public and provider audiences may have different needs, while both will require guidance on how the information should be interpreted and used.
- Performance indicators can't capture all aspects of health care. Report developers might consider how public reporting fits with other accountability and quality improvement tools.
- The value of public reporting must be weighed in the context of alternative uses for the resources employed. Does the value of the data collected justify the cost?
- Participation in reporting initiatives can be mandatory or voluntary. There is something to be said for both.

"Public reporting of performance data is likely to be an enduring feature of Canada's health system," says Zelmer. "Our challenge is to learn from Canadian experiences and that of other jurisdictions in order to get the most from such reporting in the future."

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