

Considering Quality: Engaging Consumers to Make Better Health Decisions

A Grantmakers in Health Issue Dialogue

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Structured Abstract

Purpose: In order to make informed healthcare decisions and to fully participate in the care process, consumers need reliable, understandable, accessible, information. This Grantmakers in Health (GIH) Issue Dialogue increased funder understanding of how consumer information can influence appropriate, quality-based healthcare choices and the types of quality information currently available. Funders also explored translation of quality information into understandable, usable formats. The conference emphasized the importance of collaboration between public and private funders to support research and specific strategies as well as dissemination of findings and new knowledge.

Scope: Through presentations from quality experts, consumer advocates, researchers, and funders, meeting attendees explored current work, emerging opportunities, and challenges to funding healthcare quality information. Each of the programs discussed at the Issue Dialogue is helping improve the care consumers receive by actively engaging them the care process. Grantmaker exploration of specific programs enhanced attendees' understanding of how to use funding strategies and research results to support the creation and dissemination of quality information at the local, state, and national levels.

Methods: The Issue Dialogue was held May 19, 2005, at The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation's Public Affairs Center in Washington, DC.

Results: Forty-five individuals attended the event, representing national, state, and local health foundations as well as a number of DC-based organizations working to improve healthcare quality. A background paper was prepared in advance of the meeting and distributed to meeting registrations. An *Issue Focus* article was published on consumer health information, and meeting discussion was highlighted, in the June 20, 2005, issue of GIH's newsletter, the *Bulletin*. A final Issue Brief report, *Considering Quality: Engaging Consumers to Make Better Health Decisions*, will be published in winter 2005.

Key Words: consumers, decision making, foundations, grantmakers, information, internet, quality, report cards

Purpose

This GIH Issue Dialogue, *Considering Quality: Engaging Consumers to Make Better Health Decisions*, sought to increase funders' understanding of how consumer information can influence appropriate, quality-based healthcare choices. Meeting presentations and discussion enhanced funder understanding of the types of quality information currently available; the translation of quality information into understandable, usable formats; and consumer use of such information. The meeting also emphasized the importance of collaboration between public and private funders to support research and specific strategies as well as dissemination of findings and new knowledge.

Objectives of the Issue Dialogue included:

- X raising the visibility of the relationship between consumer engagement and healthcare quality;
- X examining how consumers would like to receive quality information, how it is used as a decision-making tool, and its impact on healthcare choices;
- X exposing a broad cross-section of staff from other foundations to the signature activities of grantmakers already working to improve healthcare quality information; and
- X leveraging relationships between public and private funders to disseminate information and best practices, particularly to those working at the local level.

Scope

Given information and opportunity, consumers can play an important role in improving healthcare quality and the responsiveness of the health system to their needs. Whether they are making decisions about choosing a health plan, a particular provider, a course of treatment, or how to incorporate healthy choices into their daily lives, empowered and engaged consumers can be a potent force for change.

The sheer volume of health information available to consumers is staggering. Report cards, guidelines, and other literature are readily available from providers, health plans, government agencies, and consumer groups. In addition, there are between 10,000 and 100,000 health-focused websites, many of which offer downloadable publications and interactive decision-making tools. In fact, an estimated 70 million Americans now use the internet to retrieve health information, search for healthcare facilities and providers, find comparative quality information, research a specific illness or disease, learn about treatment options, and find information about healthy lifestyles.

Despite the richness of these resources, consumers often have difficulty interpreting and using such information. Healthcare decision making requires consumers to use information that includes technical terms and to compare multiple options simultaneously. For example, as consumers consider specific quality measures, such as how frequently heart attack patients received beta-blocker treatment, they must also think about other important factors, such as cost or accessibility. They must also weigh factors according to individual values, needs, and preferences.

Information about healthcare must be readily available to consumers, be presented in an understandable format, and be relevant to the decisions people need to make. It must be clear and designed to accommodate differences in consumer characteristics, such as literacy level and English proficiency. Also, though consumers want unbiased, expert information, they also want to know how others like them evaluate care.

Helping consumers access and interpret health information fits into the mission of many foundations as they seek to improve the health of individuals and communities. Health grantmakers can help make quality information accessible, support the development of information technology to collect and disseminate information, and support advocacy efforts to help consumers understand their healthcare choices and integrate quality into decisions.

Method

The Issue Dialogue was held May 19, 2005, at The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation's Public Affairs Center in Washington, DC. Forty-five individuals attended the event. Participants were drawn from a cross-section of health philanthropy, including both large and small foundations, national and local grantmakers, and representatives from both new and more established foundations. The audience also included representatives from a number of DC-based organizations working to improve healthcare quality.

Issue Dialogues are a unique product of GIH because they are more than just general information sessions or briefings on health policy issues. The consumer quality meeting was a working session, with participants actively discussing the issues at hand. Physically, the meeting room was arranged to enhance dialogue among speakers and participants, with tables arranged in a hollow square. Additionally, although participants heard from a number of speakers, formal remarks were limited to allow the maximum amount of time for discussion.

The Issue Dialogue began with an expert overview of the issue, which included the latest research findings. Health policy researchers presented findings on decision making by consumers who have access to and use quality information, as well as the effects of the availability of such information on provider quality. The meeting also included an in-depth discussion of the role of technology, especially the internet, in enhancing access to health information and, ultimately, improving the quality of care patients receive. Finally, the Issue Dialogue included presentations from both public and private funders and the roles they play in developing and disseminating health information, helping consumers understand health information, and empowering consumers to use their knowledge to advocate on their own behalf.

A background paper was prepared in advance of the meeting and distributed to meeting registrants. An Issue Focus article was published on consumer health information, and meeting discussion was highlighted, in the June 20, 2005, issue of GIH's newsletter, the *Bulletin*. The *Bulletin* has a distribution of more than 1,800 grantmakers, researchers, and others. A final Issue Brief report, *Considering Quality: Engaging Consumers to Make Better Health Decisions*, will be published in winter 2005. Building on the background

paper, the Issue Brief will incorporate meeting presentations and discussion. These GIH reports reach an audience of approximately 1,500 and are also posted to the GIH website.

Results

GIH meetings include evaluation forms distributed at the meeting to allow feedback and comments on program content, speaker effectiveness, and relevance of topics to grantmaker work. The evaluation uses a scale of one to five, with one being unsatisfactory and five being excellent. This Issue Dialogue was successful, both in terms of content and participant interaction. Forty-four people attended the meeting; of those, 11 (9 percent) turned in evaluation forms. The average score for the overall program was 4.5. The average scores for usefulness of information in participants' work and meeting expectations were 4.2 and 4.3, respectively. The average score for meeting speakers was 4.2.

Publications and Products

Grantmakers In Health, *Considering Quality: Engaging Consumers to Make Better Health Decisions* (Washington, DC: May 19, 2005).

Grantmakers In Health, *Issue Focus: Considering Quality: Engaging Consumers to Make Better Health Decisions* (Washington, DC: June 20, 2005).