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RESEARCH SUMMARY

A Scientific Approach to Eliciting Patient Narratives

The Aim

Narratives from patients about their health care experiences can provide a valuable complement to standardized survey scores, both to help clinicians understand what they can do to improve their care and to engage and inform patients about differences among providers. The CAHPS® research team is developing a way to collect these narratives that is as scientifically grounded and rigorous as the CAHPS closed-ended questions that are used to gather standardized data on patient experience. Specifically, the goal is to create a short series of structured open-ended questions that result in narrative responses that have four attributes:

- **Complete**: They create a full picture of the experiences that matter to each patient.
- **Balanced**: They reflect both positive and negative aspects in proportion to each patient's experiences.
- **Meaningful**: They help the reader picture the patient's experience with the clinician.
- **Representative**: They include experiences from patients across a range of health status and socio-demographic characteristics.

Anticipated Benefits

The current prevailing method for collecting patient narratives is for online provider rating sites to invite anecdotal comments from any visitor, resulting in information that may be neither a representative sample of patient experiences nor a full account of those experiences. Applying a high standard of scientific rigor to the collection of open-ended survey responses can ensure that the resulting information has value to consumers trying to assess their options as well as the providers seeking to better understand and improve their patients' health care experiences.

Our Approach

The CAHPS team has systematically developed and tested open-ended questions to prompt patients to convey their experiences with their health care providers and medical office staff. These questions can be added to the CAHPS Clinician & Group Survey. The team conducted two rounds of experimental tests, administering the survey with this short set of open-ended questions to a nationally representative sample of patients (n=900) using both telephone and Web-based response modes. To evaluate the narrative information collected by the survey questions, the team compared the content to information obtained during hour-long conversations with a subsample of 100 survey respondents who were interviewed 2 to 3 weeks later. By carefully coding all of the content, the research team was able to assess the degree to which the information in the open-ended survey responses matched the "real story" obtained through the interviews.

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Initial Findings

The set of five questions developed during the testing performs well for the completeness, balance, meaningfulness, and representativeness of the responses, relative to the hour-long interviews. Respondents answered the questions in approximately 7 minutes on the phone and only 5 minutes on the Web.

Next Steps

The team is now examining how well the 5-question series performs in the "real world" of CAHPS survey administration in order to better assess the value of patient narratives, further refine how they are collected, and explore how the patient narratives can be used to improve health care quality and empower consumers. As a first step, the California Healthcare Performance Information System (CHPI) and Massachusetts Health Quality Partners (MHQP) incorporated the item set into a pilot test of the CAHPS Clinician & Group Survey in their respective states.

Published Articles

Schlesinger M, Grob R, Shaller D, et al. Taking patients' narratives about clinicians from anecdote to science. N Engl J Med 2015 Aug;373(7):675-9.

Schlesinger M, Kanouse DE, Martino SC, et al. Complexity, public reporting, and choice of doctors: a look inside the blackest box of consumer behavior. Med Care Res Rev 2014;71:Suppl: 38S-64S.

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