Quality Family Planning Services in the United States

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The average woman who wants two children spends three decades – more than three-quarters of her reproductive life – trying to avoid pregnancy. It’s no wonder that more than 99 percent of women have used contraception at some point in their lives. Given that half of pregnancies in the United States are unintended, meaningful access to the full range of contraceptive methods and high-quality contraceptive counseling is incredibly important for ensuring that women are able to use the method that works best for them. It is essential that women and health care providers have the tools they need to access and deliver high-quality contraceptive care that enables women to plan their families and protect their health.

Performance Measures Are Key to Quality Improvement

The quality and cost of many health care services varies greatly from provider to provider, state to state, and region to region. While a growing number of health care providers and consumers are interested in improving health care quality, many are without the information necessary to properly assess the performance of different aspects of our health care system.

Performance measures assess care delivery and patient outcomes and help health plans, hospitals, clinics and individual clinicians understand the quality of the health care services they pay for or provide. There are multiple types of performance measures that assess aspects of care; they include clinical outcomes, how often patients receive evidence-based care, and patient experiences. These performance measures can:

- Help patients make more informed decisions about their care.
- Enable providers to improve the quality of care they deliver.

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While there are established performance measures to evaluate many aspects of health care, to date there are virtually no widely recognized, commonly used measures for family planning services. Without performance measures, identifying gaps in care, implementing solutions and evaluating the effectiveness of those solutions is difficult. Family planning stands to benefit from performance measures that will help clinicians continue to provide the high-quality care they are committed to offering patients, and to improve reproductive health outcomes and ensure women are getting the high-quality care they want and need.

Because measurement and evaluation are essential to improving care, performance measures that evaluate the quality of family planning services, identify gaps, and facilitate improvement are essential.

The Time is Now: High-Quality Family Planning Services for All

According to the Institute of Medicine, high quality care has eight components: safety, effectiveness, patient-centeredness, timeliness, efficiency, accessibility, equality and value. In April 2014, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Office of Population Affairs (OPA) issued recommendations for performance measures that could help achieve each of those eight components for family planning services. They include:

- The proportion of female family planning clients at risk for unintended pregnancy who adopt or continue use of an FDA-approved contraceptive method.
- Whether a family planning site dispenses or provides on-site a full range of FDA-approved contraceptive methods to meet the diverse reproductive needs and goals of clients, including short-term hormonal, long-acting reversible contraception (LARC) and emergency contraception (EC).
- The proportion of providers who follow the most current CDC recommendations on contraceptive safety.
- The proportion of family planning clients who report their provider communicates well, shows respect, spends enough time with them, and is informed about their medical history.
- Whether a family planning site uses health information technology or electronic health records to improve client reproductive health.
- Whether a family planning site offers language assistance at all points of contact for the most frequently encountered language(s).
- Whether the family planning site offers services during expanded hours of operation.

With the recognition that family planning is an area ripe for performance measure development, various organizations are spearheading efforts to identify and develop a robust set of performance measures for family planning and to integrate them into the health care system. The measure development process should be a multi-stakeholder process that increases transparency, accountability and quality, and amplifies the voices of women and those in underserved communities.
According to the CDC and OPA, “As the U.S. health-care system evolves in response to increased efforts to expand health insurance coverage, contain costs, and emphasize preventive care, providers of family planning services will face new challenges and opportunities for care delivery.” There is great potential for providers, consumers, patient advocates and other health care stakeholders to work together toward a more comprehensive approach for improving and demonstrating the quality of family planning services across the country.

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