

Wye River Group on Healthcare

The Implications of an Aging America

The Potential Role of Targeted Educational Efforts

Providers' Perspectives

Overview

Providers say the health care system is not well prepared to handle the needs of aging patients and that providers themselves have not focused enough on aging and long-term care issues. Many providers are “in denial” about long-term care because it represents such a difficult, even overwhelming, challenge for the health care system. But that challenge will only become more acute as the baby boomers reach retirement age, making it imperative that policymakers address the issue as soon as possible.

Providers are also concerned that the public seems uninformed about long-term care issues. Most people seem not to be aware of either the need to plan for long-term care or the resources that are currently available. Providers believe that the federal government should take the lead in a public education campaign to raise awareness.

Lawmakers also need to take action on long-term care financing, particularly since long-term care uses an ever-growing share of Medicaid dollars. Providers are well aware that states are struggling to keep up with their long-term care costs and that there is chronic under funding. Other financing issues that must be addressed include the reimbursement gaps that adversely affect patient care and policies that impoverish the elderly to qualify for Medicaid.

Providers also are concerned that the health care delivery system is currently too fragmented and complicated to meet the needs of elderly patients. Providers say the system should coordinate services around patients' needs rather than around reimbursement policies. Physicians and nurses would also like there to be more specialized training in handling patients with long-term care needs.

Key Themes and Areas for Action: Public Education, Product Definition, and Alternative Financing Mechanisms

Lack of Awareness

Current Situation:

There is a pervasive lack of awareness among health care providers about long-term care issues and their implications for patients. Doctors, in particular, are “in denial” about long-term care and have not yet recognized it as a high priority, according to physician organizations.

“Getting physicians focused on this will be very difficult,” said an AMA representative. “It’s not very high on the list now.”

“Survival now is such a major issue for providers. LTC is not on the radar screen,” said an AMGA representative. Even doctors age 55 and older are not focused on this. People are in denial because it’s such a huge problem.”

However, physicians *are* concerned about the financing of long-term care, which competes for state Medicaid dollars. Hospitals are also acutely aware of long-term care issues because of their role in discharge planning. They see long-term care as a driving concern, as do nurses.

“LTC nurses are frustrated. Acute care nurses are, too, because they don’t know how to get patients the ongoing care they need.” – an ANA representative.

Providers feel that the public has little awareness of long-term care issues or the resources that are available.

“People don’t know what LTC is. They think it means nursing homes. They don’t know it’s the whole continuum of services.” – an AHA representative.

What is needed?

Providers say they want policymakers and the public to begin focusing on long-term care issues. Hospital executives believe that, because of rising health care costs, now is the right time to start talking about a national health policy, including a strategy for long-term care financing and delivery.

“We don’t have a national health policy, and we need to start talking about what the right policy would be.” – an AHA representative.

Providers also want there to be an effort to start engaging consumers on the issue and educating them. But it is important that whatever the message is, it be clear and appropriately framed for different age groups.

“We first need a clear message of where we want to go,” said a National Pharmaceutical Council representative. “We need to decide what the ‘it’ is.”

“There is serious denial going on. So the messaging has to be very clear.” – an Advamed representative

Providers recommend looking for “teachable moments.” People are more receptive to thinking about long-term care when they have a relative or friend who needs long-term care, or when they join the American Cancer Society or do retirement planning.

Another suggestion for raising public awareness is to launch a direct-to-consumer ad campaign that features a credible spokesperson talking about long-term care and aging. Caregivers can be very effective spokespeople.

Providers also expressed interest in developing web-based tools for educating consumers and spreading information about the long-term care resources that are available in local communities.

Who should do it?

Providers say that state and federal governments should play the lead role in educating the public about long-term care issues, particularly because government has such a major interest, given its role in funding long-term care through the Medicaid program.

“Looking at the rising cost of Medicaid, government has to be front and center.” – a state health commissioner

“Until we can engage the Congress, we can educate the public and work collaboratively all we want but it won’t achieve much.” – an American Healthcare Association representative

However, the private sector should also play a role, and perhaps a large one.

“Government is an important part of it. But ultimately it’s really private sector leadership that gets the ball rolling.” – an Advamed representative

Financing Issues

Current Situation:

Providers are well aware that the states are facing very difficult budget times and are having trouble keeping up with the growth in their Medicaid costs, including the costs of long-term care. These cost pressures are only going to grow worse as the aging population expands, which makes it necessary to re-evaluate the financing strategy as soon as possible.

“Aging, unless we change things, is going to bankrupt us. We need to find common ground.” – an AHCA representative

Current government payment systems are under funded and often provide inadequate reimbursement, which often results in patient care that is less than optimal.

“If we continue to put the burden on the states and impoverish the elderly to qualify for Medicaid, it will have a horrible effect.” – a state health commissioner

Payment tends to be limited to certain medical interventions, while ignoring other interactions that are also important to patient care.

“We need to find ways to get reimbursement for not just medical interventions but other interactions as well.” – an ANA representative

What is needed?

Providers agree there is an urgent need to change the financing strategy for meeting long-term care needs. There must be adequate funding levels for public programs and a financing strategy that does not overburden state budgets.

“People need to wake up to the fact that LTC needs to be financed.” – a state health commissioner

It would also be helpful if people could be encouraged to purchase private long-term care insurance so that they do not have to rely on Medicaid, whose rules and policies are not always in the patients’ best interest.

“We need to get away from the current system that forces people to spend down for Medicaid eligibility.” – an AHCA representative

Care Delivery/Service Issues

Current Situation:

In addition to the financing programs, providers are concerned that the health care delivery system has become overly complex for both providers and patients. Medical services are not well coordinated, and social services are not sufficiently integrated into patient care. Fragmentation, reimbursement problems, and gaps in coverage all lead to patient care that is less than optimal.

“LTC nurses are very frustrated. Acute care nurses are, too, because they don’t know how to get patients the ongoing care they need.” – an ANA representative

Many physicians and nurses also lack specific training to treat elderly patients and help them connect with other services.

What is needed?

There is a critical need for patient-centered care that fully integrates medical, psychological and social services. The health care delivery system should be built around meeting the patients’ needs.

“The question should be not just, how do I get reimbursed? It should be, what does the patient need?” – a Mayo Foundation representative

Navigating the health care delivery system also needs to be simplified so that patients and their caregivers can get the most out of it. In addition, medical and nursing students should receive training early on that will improve their ability to treat elderly patients.

Leverage points

Providers are most interested in fixing the financing problems that negatively impact patients with long-term care needs. They are concerned that gaps in coverage and low reimbursement rates under public programs often fail to support appropriate behavior for providing quality care. Providers would support initiatives to fill these coverage gaps and to encourage consumers to purchase private insurance that enhances their ability to access quality care.