



July 7, 2004

Dear Senator:

The quality of care in America's hospitals is of vital interest to the public, health care providers, employers, government agencies, oversight bodies and others. To help people make informed decisions about health care, a coalition of organizations is implementing the first national voluntary public reporting of hospital quality information. This project, The Quality Initiative, includes information on clinical aspects of care and soon will add information on how patients view the care they received. **The ability of the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) to develop a standardized patient survey that will capture patients' perceptions of care is being challenged. Your help is needed to prevent derailment of the effort.** Without your voice a cornerstone for empowering both consumers and clinicians and moving America's health care system to more patient-centered, quality-focused care could be lost.

The Quality Initiative is a public-private partnership of the American Hospital Association, Association of American Medical Colleges, Federation of American Hospitals, CMS, AHRQ, National Quality Forum, Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, American Medical Association, AARP, AFL-CIO, Consumer – Purchaser Disclosure Group, National Association of Children's Hospitals and Related Institutions and others. The Initiative has one goal: give patients and families information to help them make health care choices.

The partnership already collects and displays hospital-specific standardized quality information on pneumonia, heart attack and heart failure patients. Soon we will expand to include more information on these conditions and on actions to prevent surgical infections. The quality data are currently being displayed on www.cms.hhs.gov in a manner designed for use by health care professionals. A site specifically aimed at consumers will be available early next year at www.medicare.gov. To date, more than 3,600 hospitals have voluntarily committed to participate in this groundbreaking effort.

The Quality Initiative partners are striving to learn more about what consumers really want to know about hospital quality. In open meetings held around the country, the public and employers clearly indicated they want information about patients' experiences with hospital care. Since the beginning, the partners have agreed that this important aspect of quality should be included in the Initiative, but we lacked a mechanism for reliably collecting nationally

standardized data from patients across the country. Thus, we have been waiting for CMS and AHRQ to complete development work on a survey instrument that will reliably and uniformly collect information on patients' experiences and the share it in a way easily understood by the public. The survey goes by the acronym HCAHPS.

About two-thirds of American hospitals now survey their patients' satisfaction using one of the many private survey vendors. Some of these companies – not the hospitals – have been opposed to HCAHPS from its inception. They have argued at every turn against an independent survey instrument. They have fought it for one simple reason: They believe that collecting such data in the public interest will impede their ability to market and sell their services to client hospitals.

Some of these survey firms have asked members of Congress to write to Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson and urge that he order CMS and AHRQ to “redirect” their efforts. They also have proposed legislative provisions that would constrain the number of questions on the HCAHPS survey or otherwise limit the work of CMS and AHRQ.

As the non-government partners in the Quality Initiative, we ask you not to derail or curtail the development of the HCAHPS survey. CMS and AHRQ are undertaking a thorough process to develop a useful and credible survey that can effectively meet consumers' needs for information while minimizing the data collection burden. We are confident that the CMS/AHRQ process of involving expert researchers, drafting instruments and methods, eliciting and responding to public comments, and testing the survey with many different groups of patients is leading to an effective and trustworthy final survey instrument. Yes, administration of the final survey will require adjustments on the part of survey firms to help their hospital clients achieve this needed public accountability, and it will require some flexibility by hospitals. However, we firmly believe Americans deserve easy-to-understand, comprehensive standardized data on hospital care in their communities, which means these adjustments are warranted.

We would appreciate the opportunity to fully brief you or your staff on the status of the Initiative and its plans for the future.

Sincerely,

American Hospital Association
AFL-CIO
AARP
American Medical Association
Association of American Medical Colleges
Consumer-Purchaser Disclosure Project
Federation of American Hospitals
Joint Commission on Accredited Healthcare Organizations

cc: House Appropriations Committee