

# A Framework To Improve America's Health and Health Care

## Issue

The U.S. leads the world in innovative treatments, clinical ingenuity, and best medical practices, spending more money per capita on health care than any other country in the world. Yet, our nation ranks 37th in overall health system performance, according to the World Health Organization. Patients, families, employers and health care professionals struggle to cope with a system that's not a system at all and that seems to get more complex, uncoordinated and frustrating every day. And, tens of millions of people have little or no access to even the most basic care: a regular checkup with a doctor.

It has been more than 15 years since the U.S. had a serious, national conversation about how to make health care work for America. With health care at the top of most consumers' priority lists and the 2008 national elections approaching, now is the time to re-ignite the debate about the future of our nation's health care system.

## AHA View

The AHA Board of Trustees, working with the support and advice of our nine regional policy boards, governing councils, committees, and the state, regional and metropolitan hospital associations, has been carefully constructing a framework for a new direction for our nation's health care – one that's focused on bringing stakeholders together to make sure patients receive the right care, at the right time, in the right place.

**The framework is a work in progress, not a finished product.** By the end of this summer, the AHA Board will approve a framework that clearly states the vision and values of the nation's hospitals, begin to strengthen this framework based on the views of others, and build a national coalition of support ... a point of consensus that can bring the health care field, policymakers, consumers and others together to begin the hard work of change.

The framework is built on five important goals that must be achieved to truly change health care – an emphasis on prevention and wellness; more efficient, affordable care, higher quality care; access to information – for both consumers and providers; and health coverage for all, paid for by all.

**Focus on Wellness.** Our framework emphasizes the "health" in health care. Keeping people well and improving their health must be a focus of change. We need to strengthen the availability of and access to primary care. More attention must be directed at prevention and encouraging healthy lifestyles and greater personal responsibility in being healthier. That will mean using financial incentives to reward healthy behavior, more effort in our education system, more community collaboration by hospitals, the public health community and others to promote health, and educating the public.



**More Efficient, Affordable Care.** America will not be satisfied unless and until the cost of insurance and health care are affordable. This can begin by sharing with the public quality and pricing information for providers, payers and suppliers. We need to better manage chronic disease, spend limited resources on care, not paperwork, and have enough well-trained health care workers.

**Higher Quality Care.** The best care is when caregivers and patients work as a team to make the right decisions with the best possible information. We need to invest in the research that will identify the best treatments, technologies and protocols, and then reward providers that use them. Providers working together in networks, paid in a way that promotes teamwork, will do much to end the fragmentation that frustrates patients and providers. We must coordinate the treatment of physical and behavioral health needs, reward care outcomes, not the number of patients seen, and make palliative care more available and better understood. And we must begin now to build the kind of workforce we will need to deliver the care of the future in many different settings, not just the hospital or physician's office.

**Better Information.** Information is the lynchpin of a world-class health care system. Portable electronic health records have the potential to save lives and dollars. Cutting-edge information technology must be installed more quickly across the entire health care field. The financial and regulatory barriers to accomplish this must be eased and standards must be set so that all the information technologies can work together. At the same time, useful information on quality and pricing must be made public, so that every American is better able to make informed decisions about their care.

**Health Coverage for All Paid for by All.** This is the toughest challenge, politically and financially. Equitable, affordable health insurance must be available to all and its cost shared by individuals, employers, insurers and government. Unfunded costs must be collectively financed. While there are many ways to achieve this, we must remain firm on the objective and, for now, flexible on how we achieve that goal.

These five components of our framework can be five sturdy pillars of a new and improved health care system in America. There are many ways to achieve these goals, and creating detailed solutions will take time and require key stakeholders working together to define how we do that. Many coalitions, associations, policy experts, advocacy groups, politicians and others will surface with their "plans" for health care reform. That's the nature of our political debates. The AHA's work is not aimed at competing with any other group or individual; the goal is move our nation toward a better way of taking care of patients and communities.