

# U.S. Health Care Ranks Last on Several Measures

BY NASEEM S. MILLER

Lack of universal health insurance was cited as one of the reasons the United States' health care system was ranked last behind six other industrialized nations on measures of quality, efficiency, patient safety, access to care, and equity in a new report by the Commonwealth Fund.

Although the United States spends the most overall on health care, it fails to provide access for low-income individuals, wrote the study authors. Furthermore, unlike their counterparts in other industrialized countries, U.S. patients usually don't have a medical home.

The United States ranked first, however, on areas such as preventive care, wait time for specialist care, and non-emergency surgical care.

One measure on which the United States ranked a "clear last" is equity, ac-

VITALS

**Major Finding:** The health care systems of six other industrial countries outranked the U.S. system in measures including quality, efficiency, patient safety, access to care, and equity.

**Data Source:** National mortality data and the Commonwealth Fund International Health Policy Surveys of 2007, 2008, and 2009.

**Disclosures:** The report was funded by the Commonwealth Fund.

According to the study. Compared with their counterparts in the other six countries studied—Australia, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom—low-income patients in the United States are less likely to visit a physician when they're sick, see a dentist, or receive recommended tests, treatments, or follow-up care.

"When a country fails to meet the needs of the most vulnerable, it also fails

to meet the needs of the average citizen," the report stated. The United States "should devote far greater attention to seeing a health system that works well for all Americans."

The report is the result of a compilation of mortality data from seven countries and surveys of approximately 21,000 adults and 6,700 physicians regarding their experiences with care and their ratings of various dimensions of care. The study authors said that despite the differences among the countries, measures such as access to care and emergency department visits are universal.

The findings indicate that U.S. physicians and patients believe that given the amount of money spent on health care,

the country could have a better health care system. The study authors expressed hope that the health reform laws and their promise of increased Medicare and Medicaid payments would encourage more medical students to choose primary care.

"These findings are clearly disappointing for U.S. patients and their families," Karen Davis, Commonwealth Fund president, said at a press briefing. "Fortunately, the recently enacted health reform legislation holds substantial promise for transforming the U.S. health care system into a more effective, efficient, and patient-centered system."

The Commonwealth Fund report, "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: How the Performance of the U.S. Health Care System Compares Internationally," updates information that was last published in 2007, when the United States also ranked at the bottom overall. ■

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