

Doing something right often costs less than doing it wrong

By Kathleen Sebelius and Charles J. Barnett

Over the years, leaders in every industry have learned that doing something right often costs less than doing it wrong. We came together in Austin this week to talk about how applying that same principle in health care can protect lives and save billions of dollars.

There is no doubt that America has the world's most skilled doctors and nurses and its finest hospitals. Every day, many Americans receive care that is as good as or better than any in the world. But far too often, we fall short of that high standard.

A recent study found that nearly one out of three hospital patients is harmed by his or her care. And the Institute of Medicine estimates that as many as 100,000 Americans die each year from preventable medical errors in hospitals. That's about the number of annual deaths caused by auto accidents, AIDS, and breast cancer combined.

These mistakes don't just cause pain and anguish. They also add to skyrocketing health insurance bills for families, businesses, and government at every level.

We know that these errors are not the result of a careless workforce. Health-care professionals want to offer good care. But good people get trapped in bad systems. Fragmented delivery of care, missing data, and poor communication between providers can all lead to dangerous medical errors.

The good news is that hospitals across the country are showing that delivering better care is possible.

For example, the Seton Family of Hospitals, a member of Ascension Health, has reduced serious complications during birth by 93 percent over the last decade by following best practices. And by making sure one group of asthma patients consistently get the right follow-up care and appropriate preventive treatment, Seton reduced those patients' emergency room visits by 37 percent and hospital stays by 63 percent.

We can see pockets of excellence like this around the country. The Seton Family and its parent organization, Ascension Health, the nation's third-largest health system, have achieved remarkable results in eliminating

preventable mortality, lowering birth trauma rates, reducing bed sores and keeping patients safe. And yet, these innovations have spread far too slowly.

That's why the Department of Health and Human Services has joined with the Seton Family, Ascension Health, and more than 1,200 other hospitals nationwide, along with hundreds of employers, health insurers, provider organizations, and patient advocates, to launch the Partnership for Patients, an unprecedented alliance that will promote innovations to improve hospital care and reduce wasteful spending.

We've never seen this many high-level partners join together to promote patient safety. And to get started, we are setting two ambitious goals for the next three years.

We want to reduce preventable injuries in hospitals by 40 percent. And we want to cut readmissions by 20 percent, targeting the return trips to the hospital that should never have occurred. Achieving these goals would save 60,000 lives and protect more than 1.6 million patients from complications that would put them back in the hospital.

If we succeed, countless Americans will have more healthy years to share with their loved ones.

But there's another advantage. Reducing preventable errors and unnecessary hospital readmissions would save \$50 billion over 10 years in Medicare costs alone. At a time when Medicare costs are expected to rise 91 percent over the next decade -- with similarly frightening trends threatening the budgets of states, businesses, and families -- we have to start bringing down health care costs now.

There are two ways to do that: providing less care or providing better care. Seton chose the second option and its patients and their families are already beginning to see the benefits. The Partnership for Patients is putting thousands of communities on the same path, and together we're building a healthier, stronger, and more prosperous nation.

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