

QIA Regional Solution

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Quality improvement is the No. 1 job for everyone involved in health care — doctors, nurses, technicians and other medical group staff members, as well as health plans, hospitals, laboratories and even patients themselves. Top-rated organizations achieve their “best of the best” status because they continuously assess and measure their performance in a structured way, scrutinizing their weakest areas and finding ways to make them stronger. Those of us in health care recognize that the results of our policies, processes and protocols are critical and even life changing to those we

serve. It isn't enough to be good, or even to be at the top of the ratings list. We have a special obligation to reach higher and strive harder to continuously improve the quality of the services we provide.

That is what CAPG and its member physician organizations are doing in Southern California's Inland Empire. Partnering with Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield, HealthNet and the Pacific Business Group on Health (PBGH), we launched the Inland Quality Collaborative (IQC) in April 2007. The collaborative now meets quarterly, following the CAPG regional meetings

in Riverside. At these sessions, physician groups that are normally competitors are coming together — reaching across the aisle, in political speak — to work jointly to improve health care quality throughout California's fastest-growing region.

CAPG members serve 1.6 million of the 4 million residents in the cities, mountains, deserts and rural areas of Riverside and San Bernardino counties. The challenges created by this diversity and rapid growth led us to launch this new initiative with the goal of improving quality, in both clinical and

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patient satisfaction measures, for citizens across the region.

The IQC is a broad partnership of concerned organizations interested in maintaining high levels of health care quality. In addition to 14 participating CAPG medical groups and IPAs and the founding partners, the collaborative is also joined by the Inland Empire Health Plan, Riverside County Department of Public Health, Riverside County Hospital and Medical Center and Riverside County Medical Association. The concept originated with the Inland Empire Region of CAPG and is chaired by Howard Saner. It is supported by the California Quality Collaborative, a program of PBGH, which is directed by Diane Stewart. In co-authoring this article, the two of us wanted to demonstrate how effective cooperative efforts can be in improving quality and also to commend the planning team that made this program a success.

All these organizations are committed to quality improvement. Dr. Brad Gilbert, Executive Officer of the Inland Empire Health Plan, said his group is pleased to participate in IQC. "By approaching quality improvement in a collaborative manner across health plans, medical groups and hospitals, we can have a broader positive

impact on the overall health of the community," he explained.

Sharing has been an important part of all IQC meetings. We've been gratified by the openness with which our physician groups have talked about their problems and, more importantly, about their solutions. We've found that what works for one medical group has the potential to work for another; that a small policy change or adoption of a new process can often make a remarkable difference.

Each IQC meeting is focused on a different issue. Top leaders and quality improvement staff from the participating organizations share best practices, service protocols, methods for helping patients manage their chronic illnesses and other strategies for quality improvement. Every organization brings its strengths to the meetings and takes back the improvement ideas it needs. Additional ideas and community resources are shared more broadly through the blog newsletter, inlandquality.wordpress.com. CEOs from the organizations have also held a dinner meeting to ensure that the emphasis on quality improvement is a top-down effort. Their concern is not only the quality in their own organization, but the health care offered to all the citizens of the Inland Empire.

The benefits of this initiative became evident in less than a year, when results were published for the annual Integrated Health Association's Pay for Performance (P4P) program in March of 2008. The highly acclaimed P4P program measures performance in a variety of clinical and patient satisfaction categories. Though clinical scores were not yet available at the time this article was published, we are able to cite results from the patient satisfaction measures. We compared the scores made by the 14 CAPG member groups that participated in the Inland Quality Collaborative with those of 15 nonparticipating groups. On average, the IQC participants raised their overall rating in patient satisfaction almost 25% more than nonparticipating groups. In addition, patient ratings of IQC participating physician groups exceeded nonparticipants in all but one of the six publicly reported patient satisfaction categories.

Don Crane, President and CEO of CAPG, points to these results with pride and suggests that other regions might develop similar programs. "The board and I applaud what our Inland Empire physician groups and their partners are doing to bring the all-important task of improving quality into focus," he says. "Their willingness to share their successes, and sometimes their competitive advantages, shows a true dedication to the principles of the health care professions."

We've recorded real, measurable successes in our first year, and we hear many favorable comments from our members and partners. We're more than pleased with the progress, and we think it is a model that others may want to adopt. It takes time and effort and trust in our goals to establish a working group like this, but we believe it is a continuing and growing benefit for the people of the Inland Empire. It also speaks well for all our participants. When we work together to make quality improvement our No. 1 job, everyone is a winner. ■

