

Communicating Results to Stimulate Change

Communicating the results of its work to those in a position to create positive change lies at the core of The Commonwealth Fund's mission to enhance the common good. A professional communications staff supports the Fund's program and research departments, along with its grantees, in producing clear, timely, and strategic information on the important health and social issues of the day.

In many ways, the Fund's communications office functions as a small, specialty publishing house, producing publications in a variety of formats and distributing them to carefully targeted audiences. In addition, much Fund-supported research is published in peer-reviewed and professional journals, and the foundation's grantees and staff are often called upon by the media —

both in the United States and abroad — to comment on current issues and trends. Fund staff also organize and participate in numerous conferences and panels and undertake speaking engagements in public and professional forums. Increasingly, the Fund is learning to use electronic formats to speed the delivery of new information to wider audiences.

A RELIABLE SOURCE OF INFORMATION

Much of the Fund's grantmaking takes the form of research, carried out by investigators at institutions around the country, that yields new knowledge. The Fund's own program staff also generate information, especially through the commissioning and analysis of surveys on key issues in health care. The Fund packages and presents what it has learned to audiences able to act on its findings: health care leaders, clinicians, the health policy community, researchers, advocacy groups, the media, and others. All publications are subject to a rigorous internal review and revision process intended to refine the substance, relevance, and presentation of the work.

Between July 1999 and June 2000, The Commonwealth Fund produced, distributed, and publicized 52 surveys, reports, issue briefs, chartbooks, and other publications on a range of topics. In addition, 56 journal articles based on Fund-supported research were published in the professional literature. During the same period, 84,295 copies of those

publications were distributed through mailings to the Fund's specialized mailing lists and in response to requests. Many reports were downloaded from the Fund's website, which now averages more than 10,000 visitors per month and provides easy access to publications and program information. The Fund also produced fact sheets on important topics, briefing notes to summarize longer reports, and a variety of informational publications, including brochures, *The Commonwealth Fund Quarterly*, and the *Annual Report*.

One of the year's major undertakings was The Commonwealth Fund 1999 National Survey of Workers' Health Insurance. Based on interviews with a cross-section of 5,000 Americans, the survey was the source of more than half a dozen new reports released throughout the year, each highlighting the insurance problems of a particular group. The survey and subsequent reports helped focus public attention on the plight of the nation's 43 million uninsured.

The first report, *Can't Afford to Get Sick: A Reality for Millions of Working Americans*, showed that, despite the strongest economy in 30 years, health care costs are a major burden for many low income and middle income families. *Listening to Workers: Challenges for Employer-Sponsored Coverage in the 21st Century* demonstrated that most working Americans with employer-sponsored health insurance are satisfied with their health plans, yet many workers

cannot afford or are not offered health coverage. These two reports were followed by *Risks for Midlife Americans: Getting Sick, Becoming Disabled, or Losing a Job and Health Coverage*, which stressed the vulnerability of millions of midlife Americans to losing job-based coverage because of illness, disability, or unemployment. *Working Without Benefits: The Health Insurance Crisis Confronting Hispanic Americans* found that nearly 11 million Hispanics in the United States—most of them workers or their family members—lack health insurance. Finally, the survey was the basis for *On Their Own: Young Adults Living Without Health Insurance*, which explains why adults ages 19–29 are disproportionately likely to be uninsured.

These reports continue to generate extensive coverage by major national media, local press, and trade publications, both electronic and print. Survey findings were cited in a *Wall Street Journal* story on the underinsured, for which Fund president Karen Davis was interviewed, and in a lead editorial in *USA Today*. After targeted outreach to the Spanish-language press, *Working Without Benefits* was featured in a segment of the widely syndicated morning show "Despierta America." The report was translated into Spanish and distributed to the 400 members of the National Hispanic Medical Association, a group Davis addressed at its annual meeting

in March, and to 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives in April by the chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus.

One Fund publication in particular seemed to resonate deeply with the general public. *Out of Touch: American Men and the Health Care System* provided a troubling picture of men's experiences with doctors, health-related behaviors, and other issues. The study confirmed that the majority of men have very limited contact with physicians and with the health care system generally. They fail to get routine checkups, preventive care, and health counseling and frequently ignore symptoms or delay seeking medical attention when sick or in pain. The report dramatized the need for improvements in men's health, concluding that those can be achieved only through the combined efforts of physicians, health plans, policymakers, and men themselves.

The survey results were reported in newspaper stories and on television and radio across the nation and continue to generate interest from the media and professional groups. Highlights included an appearance by Fund president Karen Davis on NBC's "Today" show, an on-air interview with program officer and report author David Sandman on ABC News, and spots on CNN and numerous local network affiliates. "Marketplace," the influential public radio program, also broadcast a report. Stories on the survey appeared in the

Associated Press, *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *USA Today*.

As the debate over how to provide a prescription drug benefit for Medicare beneficiaries moved into the mainstream of public discourse, the Fund served as an important source of information. Journalists and others sought out the expertise of Medicare's Future program director Marilyn Moon, Fund staff, and grantee Bruce Stuart, a professor at the University of Maryland's School of Pharmacy, who authored an issue brief on the topic. Stuart found that the private drug coverage currently held by many Medicare beneficiaries is more fragile than commonly believed and is especially vulnerable to changes in coverage or health status. His findings were reported in the *White House Bulletin*, a D.C.-based fax news publication that goes to key policymakers, government officials, and federal legislative staff.

SHARING EXPERTISE

With access to a wealth of expertise through its grantees and its own program staff, the Fund can play a significant role in informing policymakers, industry leaders, and health care researchers. Fund staff and grantees speak often at professional conferences, seminars, and briefings organized by the Fund and

other groups. At the 1999 annual meeting of the Academy for Health Services Research and Health Policy — the premier professional group for health care researchers — senior Fund staff made numerous presentations, served on discussion panels, and held poster sessions. More than 30 grantees made presentations or participated on panels. In addition, several grantees were called to testify before Congress in the past year, among them the Urban Institute's Marilyn Moon, Bruce Vladeck of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, and David Zimmerman of the University of Wisconsin.

As the principal public representative of the Fund, president Karen Davis maintained an active public speaking presence in 1999–2000. Notable engagements included an address to the annual meeting of the Institute of Medicine on the growing problem of the uninsured, a talk for senior congressional health staffers at a Fund-sponsored January retreat in Annapolis on recent trends in insurance coverage, a discussion at the inaugural meeting of the newly formed Association of Health Care Journalists on the erosion of the safety net for the uninsured, and an overview for the National Legislative Council of the American Association of Retired Persons of the potential benefits of making prescription drugs more accessible to older Americans. During a trip to

Australia in August 1999, Davis gave several presentations on findings from The Commonwealth Fund 1998 International Health Policy Survey, which examined public views of the national health systems in five countries and received extensive print and radio coverage.

One of the Fund's most important communications initiatives of the past year was the Commonwealth Fund/Harvard University Bipartisan Congressional Retreat. Held in January 2000, the event provided an opportunity for an off-the-record exchange of information and ideas among key members of the Senate and House of Representatives, as well as national experts in health care policy. Participants gained a deeper understanding of vital health care issues, while strengthening relationships and building trust across party lines. Conference topics included Medicare and long-term care for an aging population, the challenge of the uninsured, Medicare prescription drug coverage, patient protection and the right to sue, and quality-of-care report cards and medical error reduction.

The year 1999 also saw the initiation of the Wagner/Commonwealth Dialogue Series. These symposia, jointly sponsored by the Fund and New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, provided a forum for approximately 100 leading New York City policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to explore current issues in

health policy. The Fund also supported the Jacobs Institute's first Forum on Women's Health, attended by 80 leaders from the U.S. Public Health Service and women's health advocacy organizations. Proceedings were published in the organization's journal, *Women's Health Issues*.

On the international front, the Fund's third International Symposium on Health Care Policy, cosponsored with the journal *Health Affairs*, brought together more than 60 health policy leaders from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States to share perspectives on national health issues. Held in October 2000, the gathering focused on findings regarding quality of care from the Fund-sponsored 2000 International Health Policy Survey of Physicians. Papers from the second annual symposium, which considered national systems for providing care to elderly populations, were published in the May/June 2000 issue of *Health Affairs*.

Another opportunity for cross-national learning was provided by the second U.S.–U.K. meeting on health care quality, a three-day event held at Ditchley Park in Oxfordshire, England. Approximately 40 prominent health policy leaders and experts from the two countries came together to exchange ideas. As a result, two national governmental health agencies have pledged to work together on three issues: reducing

medical errors, using information technology to improve quality, and national reporting on quality of care.

PROFESSIONAL APPEAL: PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATION

In addition to producing and distributing its own publications, the Fund encourages grantees to publish their research in peer-reviewed and professional journals and in books issued by commercial and academic presses. The independence, authority, and prestige associated with publication in such outlets as *Academic Medicine*, *Annals of Internal Medicine*, *Health Affairs*, *Health Services Research*, the *New England Journal of Medicine*, and the *Journal of the American Medical Association* can significantly enhance the impact of Fund-supported research.

The Fund often helps disseminate grantee publications more widely by reprinting articles and book chapters for special mass mailings, accompanied by briefing notes. Sixteen articles were reprinted and mailed in 1999–2000, including studies by Lynn Nonnemaker on women medical school graduates' career paths and by Paul Griner, M.D., and Ernest Moy, M.D., on the concentration of National Institutes of Health research awards to certain medical schools (both reprinted from the *New England Journal of Medicine*); and a

piece by Jan Blustein, M.D., examining prescription drug coverage for Medicare beneficiaries with hypertension (reprinted from *Health Affairs*). The Fund's communications office issues press releases and contacts the media to generate coverage of important articles.

Among the highlights of the past year were two Fund-supported studies concerning end-of-life care by Ezekiel J. Emanuel, M.D., and colleagues. The first study, "Assistance from Family Members, Friends, Paid Caregivers, and Volunteers in the Care of the Terminally Ill," published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, analyzes the nature of caregiving for the dying in contemporary American society. "Understanding Economic and Other Burdens of Terminal Illness: The Experience of Patients and Their Caregivers," which appeared in *Annals of Internal Medicine*, focuses on the financial, emotional, and psychological hardships of caring for the terminally ill. The studies received wide coverage in the press, including the *New York Times*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *Chicago Tribune*. An Associated Press story concerning the first study was picked up across the country.

Another influential article published with Fund support examined the quality of the news media's reporting on new medications. Australian journalist Ray Moynihan, who conceived and executed the study while a Harkness Fellow in Health Care Policy at Harvard, found that newspaper and television reports on new medications tend to exaggerate benefits, ignore risks, fail to disclose costs, and neglect potential conflicts of interest. The paper, coauthored by Harvard's Steven Soumerai, M.D., and Lisa Bero, of the University of California, San Francisco, was published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* and was prominently covered by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, National Public Radio, and other media outlets.

An article coauthored by Fund vice president Cathy Shoen, with Karen Donelan and Catherine DesRoches, was published by *Medscape General Medicine* (www.medscape.com/journal/MedGenMed), the online peer-reviewed general medical journal. Based on a survey of more than 4,000 Americans ages 18–64, "Inadequate Health Insurance: Costs and Consequences" shatters the notion that all health insurance necessarily provides protection against financial risk. Nearly one in five insured adults surveyed said there was a time in the past year when they did not

have enough money to pay for some health care costs, revealing that under-insurance, as well as lack of insurance, limits access to care.

The Fund also assists other organizations in issuing publications of special import. This year, for example, the Fund provided partial support for an Institute of Medicine report, *To Err is Human*, which brought attention and action to bear on the problem of medical errors. According to the report, medical errors are responsible for at least 44,000 patient deaths each year in the United States. Karen Davis appeared on MSNBC to discuss the report.

THE YEAR AHEAD

In the coming year, the Fund will continue to make the expertise of its staff and grantees available to the media and key constituencies. We will also continue to produce, disseminate, and publicize a steady output of publications, even as we reach out to new audiences for our evolving work on health care quality. Recognizing, however, that limited resources prevent us from mailing a printed copy of each published report to everyone who might find it useful, we are aggressively seeking to exploit the promise of the internet and e-mail to reach ever larger and more diverse audiences. We are eager to see the results of

our recently implemented e-mail alert system, which lets people know as soon as a new Fund publication becomes available and provides a direct link to viewing and ordering information. (To receive alerts, please register through our web page at www.cmf.org.) With new developments anticipated in the health policy environment and in communications technology, we expect an exciting year.