

# Communicating Ideas for the Common Good

“Ideas must work their way through the brains and arms of men and women,” wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson, “or they are no better than dreams.” From rural health and immunization programs in the early 20th century to efforts to expand health insurance coverage in the 21st century, The Commonwealth Fund has focused on identifying ideas that promise a large and beneficial impact on the life chances of Americans — and on putting those ideas to work through its own programs. Increasingly, the Fund has recognized that success depends, as well, on its ability to communicate ideas to others who can act upon them more broadly to benefit the common good.

As a result, the Fund has taken steps in recent years to expand and strengthen its communications program. Today, it conducts a robust publishing operation, works actively with the media to gain greater visibility for the research it sponsors, and maintains a rich array of

resources on its recently upgraded web site. Fund-supported research is frequently published in distinguished peer-reviewed and professional journals, and Fund staff members organize and participate in numerous conferences and undertake speaking engagements in public and professional forums.

## THE WRITTEN WORD

In fiscal year 2000–01, the Fund’s communications efforts were especially productive. The foundation published 54 new reports and distributed more than 113,000 copies through mailings to individuals identified in the Fund’s targeted mailing lists and in response to unsolicited requests. In addition to reports, issue and policy briefs, and chartbooks, 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 Fund’s major communications initiatives in the past year was the publication and release of a set of 10 policy reports from its Task Force on the Future of Health Insurance. Focusing on incremental approaches for expanding insurance coverage, the reports were accompanied by an overview paper, *Challenges and Options for Increasing the Number of Americans with Health Insurance*, written by Sherry Glied of Columbia University, and a set of detailed table summaries providing cost and coverage estimates for each option. The

papers debuted at a December 2000 meeting in Washington, D.C., called “Turning Campaign Promises into Reality: Opportunities for a New President and Congress to Expand Health Insurance Coverage,” attended by about 100 health policy experts and Capitol Hill staffers.

The task force also issued two reports by Jeanne Lambrew of George Washington University that generated significant attention in the press. *Health Insurance: A Family Affair*, released in May 2001, made the case that extending health coverage to the parents of children enrolled in public insurance programs would reduce the number of uninsured adults in our country. The study prompted a story in the *Washington Post*. A second report, issued in August 2001, revealed that the number of women without health insurance is growing three times as fast as the rate for men and that, if the trend continues, uninsured women will outnumber uninsured men by 2005. These and other findings were reported in the *New York Times* and on *ABC World News Tonight* and *CNN Headline News*.

Topics related to Medicare — including its benefit package and concerns over out-of-pocket costs — were also the subject of several Fund reports in the past year. A report released in July 2000 examined how people approaching the age of Medicare eligibility and recently enrolled beneficiaries feel about the program. The report, *Counting on Medicare: Perspectives and Concerns of Americans Ages 50 to 70*, revealed that two-thirds of adults over age 50 say they would be interested in participating in Medicare

before age 65. Not surprisingly, men and women ages 50–70 also indicated that they overwhelmingly endorse the idea of adding prescription drug coverage to the basic Medicare package.

In January, the Fund published a study by researchers at the Urban Institute demonstrating that Medicare beneficiaries will have to pay substantially more out of their own pockets for health care in the future. *Growth in Medicare and Out-of-Pocket Spending: Impact on Vulnerable Beneficiaries*, by Stephanie Maxwell, Marilyn Moon, and Misha Segal, estimates that older low-income women in poor health spend nearly three-fourths (72 percent) of their income for health care or forgo care altogether. In May, the Fund released another report by the Urban Institute, *Reforming Medicare’s Benefit Package: Impact on Beneficiary Expenditures*, which presented four options for modernizing Medicare that would reverse spiraling out-of-pocket costs for beneficiaries. Findings from the report served as the basis for Fund President Karen Davis’s invited testimony before the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Health on May 9, 2001.

Over the past year, the Fund’s Task Force on Academic Health Centers issued three major reports on key issues confronting the nation’s teaching hospitals. In July 2000, the task force released *Health Care at the Cutting Edge: The Role of Academic Health Centers in the Provision of Specialty Care*, which describes AHCs’ role as the main providers and initial developers of many rare procedures and treatments. Among the report’s findings is that AHCs provide

a disproportionate share of specialty services to poor and uninsured patients. *Managing Academic Health Centers: Meeting the Challenges of the New Health Care World*, which came out in October 2000, explored the different ways these institutions are changing their governance and management in order to survive in the changing health care marketplace. The third report, *A Shared Responsibility: Academic Health Centers and the Provision of Indigent Care*, was released in April 2001 and demonstrates that the amount of charity care provided is increasing faster in AHCs than in other types of hospitals.

The task force studies together garnered substantial coverage in various media outlets, including *USA Today*, the Associated Press, and Scripps Howard News Service. A segment on financial stresses experienced by academic health centers aired on *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*. The piece included an interview with David Blumenthal, M.D., executive director of the task force.

The Fund also published studies examining insurance coverage and access to care among some of the most vulnerable groups in society. A report by Deborah Bachrach illuminated the much-debated issue of whether or not legal immigrants who arrived in the United States after passage of the 1996 welfare reform law should be eligible for Medicaid or other public health benefits. Released in February 2001, the study, *Expanding Access to Health Insurance Coverage for Low-Income Immigrants in New York State*, showed that as many as 167,000 legal immigrants in New York could be

eligible for Medicaid and Family Health Plus if current restrictions were reversed. In *Running in Place: How Job Characteristics, Immigrant Status, and Family Structure Keep Hispanics Uninsured*, Claudia L. Schur and Jacob Feldman of Project HOPE discussed factors behind the high uninsured rates found among Hispanics, especially recent immigrants.

Both reports caught the attention of the media, both English- and Spanish-language. Findings from *Running in Place* made headlines in newspapers across the country after the release of an Associated Press article, and a column in the *New York Times* also cited the report.

At a time when many businesses are facing rising costs for employee health insurance, another Fund report noted the severe erosion in employer-based health benefits that has taken place over the past two decades. In *How the New Labor Market is Squeezing Workforce Health Benefits*, analysts with the Center for National Policy discuss how shifts in the U.S. labor market have led to declining numbers of workers with health coverage through their own employers. Extensive media coverage included *CNN Headline News* and *USA Today*.

#### PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS

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. More than 65 articles and book chapters by staff and grantees were published in fiscal year 2000–01

on work supported by the Fund. Given the independence, authority, and prestige associated with publication in such outlets as *Academic Medicine*, *Archives of Internal Medicine*, the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, *Health Affairs*, and the *New England Journal of Medicine*, this mode of dissemination can significantly enhance the impact of Fund-supported research.

#### GETTING THE WORD OUT: PANELS, CONFERENCES, AND FORUMS

With access to the considerable expertise of its grantees and program staff, the Fund can play an important role in informing policymakers, industry leaders, and health care researchers. Fund staff and grantees attend and speak at numerous professional conferences, seminars, and briefings, organized by the Fund and other groups. In addition, several prominent grantees were called to testify before Congress in 2000–01, among them Jeanne Lambrew, Jack Meyer, and Marilyn Moon.

At the 2001 annual meeting of the Academy for Health Services Research and Health Policy—the leading professional group for health care researchers—more than 20 grantees and senior Fund staff gave presentations, served on discussion panels, and held poster sessions.

As the principal spokesperson for the foundation, Fund president Karen Davis was an active speaker in 2000–01, reaching out to many audiences on a variety of topics. Foremost among Davis's presentations was the John R. Hogness Award Lecture, which she delivered in

October 2000 at the annual meeting of the Association of Academic Health Centers annual meeting in Tucson, Arizona. The speech, in which Davis detailed her “2020 vision for American health care,” formed the basis for a subsequent journal article in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* that Davis coauthored with Fund colleagues Cathy Schoen and Steven Schoenbaum, M.D.—a piece that generated significant feedback and discussion within the health care policy community. The plan outlined in the article was also discussed in a *USA Today* editorial.

In March 2001, Davis was invited to testify before the Senate Finance Committee about potential ways to expand existing health insurance programs, such as Medicaid and the State Child Health Insurance Program (CHIP), to cover more of the working poor and their families.

One of the Fund's most important communications initiatives is the Commonwealth Fund/Harvard University Bipartisan Congressional Retreat. The latest retreat, held in January 2001, 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. Two dozen members of the new 107th Congress attended the three-day conference, where they discussed topics ranging from public attitudes about health care to medical errors.

Senior congressional staff members met in Baltimore in January 2001 to take part in a seminar titled “Health Policy 2001: Partisanship or Progress?”

A keynote speech by Norman Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute led off the two-day retreat, cosponsored by the Fund, the Alliance for Health Reform, and the Catholic Health Association of the United States.

The year 2000–01 also saw continuation 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, provide a forum for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to explore current issues in health policy. Combined, the three sessions during the year attracted approximately 475 people. The Fund also supported the second Jacobs Institute of Women's Health forum on women's health, "Listening to Women's Voices," attended by more than 100 women's health leaders in September 2000. Eight papers examining data from The Commonwealth Fund 1998 Survey of Women's Health were published in the May/June issue of the organization's journal, *Women's Health Issues*.

Despite the dissimilarities of their health care systems, health ministers in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States are grappling with many of the same issues: ensuring high-quality care, coping with rising costs, and meeting the needs of aging and increasingly diverse populations. The value of identifying successful innovations and sharing experiences across countries was evidenced by the ministers' enthusiastic participation in the Fund's October 2001 International

Symposium on Health Care Policy, organized in collaboration with *Health Affairs*. The meeting brought together over 50 health policy leaders and leading researchers from the five countries to discuss comparative analyses of their health systems' performance. A highlight of the conference was the signing of two historic agreements between the United States and the United Kingdom to cooperate on health care quality improvement and preparing for and responding to bioterrorist attacks. The agreement on bioterrorism was widely reported in the international media, including a front-page story in the *Financial Times* and coverage by London's *Times* and *Independent* daily newspapers, the Associated Press, Agence France-Presse, BBC Online, Channel News Asia, and the *Toronto Star*. The symposium featured intensive discussion of the Fund's 2001 International Health Policy Survey. Papers from the symposium will be submitted for publication in the May/June 2002 issue of *Health Affairs*.

Another opportunity for cross-national learning was provided by the third United Kingdom/United States conference on quality of care, held in June 2001 at Pennyhill Park in Bagshot, England. Sixty prominent health policy leaders and experts from both countries participated in the three-day event, during which they exchanged ideas on improving health care quality.

Among other notable Fund-sponsored forums was a daylong summit in May entitled "A Regional Approach to Healthcare in New England," at which a

hundred of New England's most influential health care leaders and policymakers gathered at the John F. Kennedy School of Government to discuss ways to solve some of the most difficult health care problems facing the region. Among the summit attendees were Senators Susan Collins of Maine and Jack Reed of Rhode Island, Governors Howard Dean of Vermont and Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire, and Harvard Pilgrim chief executive Charles Baker.

#### REACHING AUDIENCES THROUGH TELEVISION AND THE WEB

Increased efforts were made in the last year to reach larger audiences through television. With support through a communications President's Discretionary Fund (PDF) grant, the PBS interview show *The Open Mind* aired five programs in the past year that focused on the state of American health care. Fund president Karen Davis and grantees Donald Berwick, M.D., and Mark Chassin, M.D., were among the program's guests. A second series, sponsored by the Fund more recently, featured an interview with Samuel O. Thier, M.D., chief executive officer of Partners HealthCare System, professor of medicine at the Harvard Medical School, and a member of the Fund's board. Another PDF grant to the PBS series *To the Contrary* resulted in a segment about the Lumberton, North Carolina, Healthy Steps site, which aired last March on more than 240 PBS stations nationwide.

Another priority in 2000-01 was the creation of an e-mail alert system to

notify key audiences of new publications available on the Fund's web site or by mail. The listserv has grown steadily since its inception to more than 5,000 participants.

The Fund's web site is now a central vehicle for the dissemination of Fund publications, and an increasing number of people are accessing Fund reports directly in an easy-to-use, downloadable format. To read, order, or download reports, visit the Fund's web site at [www.cmf.org](http://www.cmf.org). To receive e-mail alerts notifying you about new publications, visit the Fund's web site to sign up or send an e-mail to [publications@cmwf.org](mailto:publications@cmwf.org).

#### FUTURE CHALLENGES AND DIRECTIONS

The Fund can be proud of its past achievements, and yet the nation's health care agenda is still a largely unfinished one. With national security a paramount concern in the months ahead, the health and well-being of our citizenry will assume renewed importance, making the Fund's traditional work even more relevant. In communications, the challenge will be to use all the methods of modern communication, from television to the internet, as well as such time-tested tools as clear writing and thinking, to make sure that emerging ideas about improving health care are brought to the marketplace and get the attention they deserve. The Fund's history and its resources put it in a strong position to contribute to the nation's future health care agenda.