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# Communicating in a Year of National Challenge

The Commonwealth Fund's communication activities have been carried out over the past year against a stark backdrop of national and world affairs. From the September 11 terrorist attacks and subsequent anthrax scare through the turbulence in the Middle East and the continuing economic downturn, Americans from all walks of life have been, and remain, occupied with serious matters of national and economic security. Even so, health care issues have loomed large on the public agenda and in the media. Threats to public health and the impact of joblessness have been painful reminders to many Americans of the value of timely, high-quality health care and health insurance.

Despite these events, the Fund recorded a highly productive year of grantmaking and a busy year communicating the results of its work. Through an expanding publishing operation, an active media relations program, a rich and growing set of resources on its website, and sponsorship and participation in numerous public forums and professional symposia, the Fund continued to reach out to key audiences in the private health care sector, the media, the research community, and federal, state, and local government.

## FUND PUBLICATIONS

Over the past year, the Fund's publication efforts have been extremely productive. The foundation published 84 new reports and other publications and distributed over 128,000 copies of those reports through targeted mailings and in response to requests. In addition to reports, issue briefs, and chartbooks, the Fund produced fact sheets on important topics, briefing notes to summarize longer reports, and a variety of informational publications, including *The Commonwealth Fund Quarterly*, the *Annual Report*, and brochures about the Fund. Significantly, research reported in Fund publications garnered the attention of major media outlets such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *National Public Radio*, *CNN*, *NBC Nightly News*, and *ABC World News Tonight*.

Among the publication highlights of the past year were findings from several major Fund surveys. The report *Security Matters: How Instability in Health Insurance Puts U.S. Workers at Risk* presented the results of The Commonwealth Fund 2001 Health Insurance Survey. Released in December 2001 along with companion issue briefs, it generated widespread media attention and was well timed for the Congressional debate about an economic stimulus package.

A major report on findings from the Fund's 2001 Health Care Quality Survey revealed that minority Americans lag behind whites on nearly every measure of health care quality. *Diverse Communities, Common Concerns: Assessing Health Care Quality for Minority Americans*, released with supporting fact sheets in March 2002, reported that African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanics are more likely than whites to experience difficulty communicating with their physicians and to encounter barriers to receiving care. Additional findings from the survey were highlighted in *Room for Improvement: Patients Report on the Quality of Their Health Care*, a report by Fund President Karen Davis and colleagues.

Other Fund reports also had broad impact. A November 2001 report by Jeanne Lambrew of George Washington University, *How the Slowing U.S. Economy Threatens Employer-Based Health Insurance*, documented the link between loss of health insurance and unemployment and estimated that 37 percent of unemployed people are uninsured. The Fund also issued two reports in February 2002 by Lori Achman and Marsha Gold of Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., underscoring problems with the Medicare+Choice program. The reports had an immediate impact on the ongoing debate about Medicare reform and were widely cited on TV and radio and in newspapers across the country.

In May 2002, the Fund released *Quality of Care in the United States: A Chartbook*, a comprehensive, first-of-its-kind statistical portrait of the state of health care quality in America. Released in Washington, D.C., at an Alliance for Health Reform briefing for policy-makers and the press, the chartbook attracted extensive

coverage in the health care media. Publication of the chartbook also revealed considerable demand for reliable health care quality information. Since its release, more than 100,000 people have viewed or downloaded the chartbook from the Fund's website.

In the past year, no topic was more prominent on the public agenda than the need for a Medicare prescription drug benefit. To shed new light on the problem, the Fund and the Kaiser Family Foundation released an eight-state survey of seniors in July 2002. The survey found that nearly one-quarter of seniors skip doses or fail to get prescriptions filled. The report was covered widely in major newspapers and on *NBC Nightly News* and *ABC World News Tonight*. The Fund also published a report by Marilyn Moon and Matthew Storeygard of the Urban Institute, *Stretching Federal Dollars: Policy Tradeoffs in Designing a Medicare Drug Benefit with Limited Resources*, which outlined workable solutions to the drug benefit conundrum.

At the end of the summer, the Fund released the results of the 2002 Workplace Health Insurance Survey. In an issue brief, *The Erosion of Employer-Based Health Coverage and the Threat to Workers' Health Care*, Jennifer Edwards, Michelle M. Doty, and Cathy Schoen of The Commonwealth Fund revealed that, because of cost, only one in four workers would be likely to keep their health insurance through COBRA if they became unemployed. The results were widely covered in the media and cited in an editorial in *USA Today* that warned of the crisis in employer-based health insurance.

During the same period, the Fund also released the report *Evaluation of the Wellspring Model for Improving Nursing Home Quality*, which examined the ingredients of success in the Wellspring alliance of 11 nonprofit nursing homes in Wisconsin. The study, conducted

by Robyn Stone and colleagues at the American Association of Homes and Services of the Aging, found that Wellspring homes had stabilized staff turnover and remained free of serious quality deficiencies on state inspections, without additional cost. The Wellspring model attracted media coverage from the *Washington Post* and NPR's *Morning Edition*, which spotlighted one of its participating homes, Good Shepherd Services, in Seymour, Wisconsin.

The Commonwealth Fund Task Force on Academic Health Centers released two important reports during the year. *Training Tomorrow's Doctors: The Medical Education Mission of Academic Health Centers* concluded that academic health centers—medical schools and their affiliated hospitals and physician groups—have been largely successful in training the nation's doctors, yet that competing demands on these institutions pose a threat to the quality of physician education down the road. *Financial Performance of Academic Health Center Hospitals, 1994–2002*, by Allen Dobson and colleagues at the Lewin Group, found that financial performance has declined more sharply in academic health center and major teaching hospitals than in other hospitals. According to the report, academic health centers' troubles are leaving them with fewer resources to subsidize their socially beneficial activities.

In addition to producing and distributing its own publications, the Fund encourages grantees to publish their research in peer-reviewed and professional journals issued by scholarly and academic publishers. With the support of the Fund, approximately 40 articles by staff and grantees were published last year in publications such as the *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, and *Health Affairs*, among others.

One particular highlight was an article by David Blumenthal, M.D., and colleagues in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* on a study sponsored by the Fund's Task Force on Academic Health Centers. The authors noted that over one in ten medical residents reported feeling unprepared to handle certain treatments and procedures within their specialties. Another article in *JAMA*, by Eric C. Schneider, M.D., and colleagues, found that African Americans are less likely than whites to receive recommended clinical care in four key areas, according to a study of Medicare managed care enrollees.

An article published last April in the web edition of the health policy journal *Health Affairs*, "Individual Insurance: How Much Financial Protection Does It Provide?" by Jon Gabel and colleagues at the Health Research and Educational Trust, explained that tax credits as proposed would be ineffective in making private health insurance affordable for most Americans. The Fund supplemented the article with a report, *Are Tax Credits Alone the Solution to Affordable Health Insurance? Comparing Individual and Group Insurance Costs in 17 U.S. Markets*, also by Gabel and colleagues.

In an article published in the web edition of *Health Affairs* in October, Fund president Karen Davis and colleagues contributed to the ongoing debate over Medicare reform. In "Medicare versus Private Insurance: Rhetoric and Reality," the authors presented evidence from the Fund's 2001 Health Insurance Survey that, compared with under-65 adults with private coverage, Medicare beneficiaries are generally more satisfied with their health insurance. In addition, beneficiaries reported fewer problems getting access to medical care, greater confidence about their access to care, and fewer instances of financial hardship

due to medical bills. The authors warned that current proposals to redesign Medicare to resemble private health insurance run the risk of undermining a program that is working well from the perspective of beneficiaries.

**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.

Now in its fourth year, one of the Fund's most important communications activities is the Commonwealth Fund/Harvard University Bipartisan Congressional Retreat. The latest retreat, held in January 2002, 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. The retreat drew 21 members of the 108th Congress, who discussed topics ranging from a Medicare prescription drug benefit to the global AIDS epidemic and bioterrorism.

More than 100 key Congressional staff members attended a retreat sponsored by the Fund, the Alliance for Health Reform, and the Catholic Health Association. This year's retreat was held in Baltimore, Maryland, in January 2002 and focused on upcoming health policy issues for the year and federal budget projections. The retreat enabled senior leaders from the Bush Administration and House and Senate staffs across an array of committees to debate different

approaches and meet together in frank discussion. Panels discussed health care in a time of tight budgets, the recession and the uninsured, bioterrorism, and Medicare concerns.

On behalf of the Fund, the Alliance for Health Reform held ten briefings and roundtable discussions in Washington, D.C., over the past year, focusing on central health policy issues before the Congress. These included Medicare, health insurance, tax credits, academic health centers, and prescription drug benefits. The lunch briefings, averaging more than 250 attendees, are a resource for Congressional staff and journalists seeking the latest information on key health issues.

Despite the dissimilarities of their health care systems, health ministers in Australia, Canada, Mexico, 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 2002 International Symposium on Health Care Policy, organized in collaboration with the journal *Health Affairs*.

The meeting brought together more than 50 health policy leaders and researchers from the five countries to compare their health systems' performance. A highlight of the symposium was the Ministers' Policy Roundtable, "Bioterrorism One Year Later: The Threat and the Opportunity for Collaboration," which reported on the progress of a formal collaboration

established at the 2001 International Symposium by U.K. Secretary of State for Health Alan Milburn and U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy G. Thompson. The symposium also featured intensive discussion of the Fund's 2002 International Health Policy Survey. Papers from the symposium will be submitted for publication in the May/June 2003 international issue of *Health Affairs*.

#### **REACHING AUDIENCES THROUGH TELEVISION AND THE INTERNET**

The Fund continued over the past year to attempt to reach larger audiences through television. With support from a communications President's Discretionary Fund (PDF) grant, the PBS interview show *The Open Mind* aired another set of five programs on the state of American health care. Among the program's guests were Samuel O. Thier, M.D., former president and CEO of Partners HealthCare System and new chairman of the Fund's board of directors; David Blumenthal, M.D., director of the Fund's Task Force on Academic Health Centers; and Christine Cassel, M.D., geriatrician and dean of the School of Medicine at the Oregon Health and Science University. Another PDF grant to the PBS series *To the Contrary*—an award-winning, half-hour weekly public affairs show with an audience of one million—featured a Fund-supported outreach effort at a federal Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program center in Brooklyn. The program aired in June 2002.

Digital technology enables the Fund to share its research with a much larger audience than would be possible through print-based dissemination alone. The Fund's e-mail alert system grew steadily over the last year, bringing immediate notification about new Fund

reports to more than 8,000 recipients. The growth of the e-mail alert system also contributed to increased traffic on the Fund's website. More than 150,000 visitors came to the Fund's site over the past year, up 10 percent from the previous year. Because visitors to the site tend to be "repeat customers," this translates to approximately 600,000 user sessions during the year. Fund reports were viewed or downloaded more than 400,000 times in fiscal year 2001–02, underscoring a remarkable transformation: today, substantially more people learn about Fund research through the internet than they do through traditional print formats.

#### **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The nation's health care agenda is still crowded with large and difficult challenges. For the Fund to help meet those challenges, its communications activities must be highly effective in getting the results of its research and programs into the hands of the right audiences in the most appropriate formats. To accomplish this, the foundation is currently conducting an audience survey to discover how it can strengthen and improve its communications efforts. The results will be used in the coming year to better serve those who are in positions to improve health policy and practice and to make progress in achieving the Fund's larger goal: to help all Americans live healthy and productive lives.

## Selected Recent Commonwealth Fund Publications

All publications listed below, as well as many others, can be obtained in print or electronic format through The Commonwealth Fund website, [www.cmwf.org](http://www.cmwf.org), or by calling 1-888-777-2744.

### Task Force on the Future of Health Insurance

*Expanding Health Insurance Coverage: Creative State Solutions for Challenging Times* (#596). S. Silow-Carrroll, E. K. Waldman, H. Sacks, J. A. Meyer.

*Health Insurance Tax Credits: Will They Work for Women?* (#589). S. R. Collins, S. B. Berkson, D. A. Downey.

*Staying Covered: The Importance of Retaining Health Insurance for Low-Income Families* (#586). L. Ku, D. C. Ross.

*The Erosion of Employer-Based Health Coverage and the Threat to Workers' Health Care* (#559). J. N. Edwards, M. M. Doty, C. Schoen.

*Seniors and Prescription Drugs: Findings from a 2001 Survey of Seniors in Eight States* (#002). M. Kitchman, T. Neuman, D. Sandman, C. Schoen, D. G. Safran, J. Montgomery, W. Rogers.

*Security Matters: How Instability in Health Insurance Puts U.S. Workers at Risk* (#512). L. Duchon, C. Schoen, M. M. Doty, K. Davis, E. Strumpf, S. Bruegman.

*Diagnosing Disparities in Health Insurance for Women: A Prescription for Change* (#493). J. M. Lambrew.

### Health Care Quality Improvement

*Escape Fire: Lessons for the Future of Health Care* (#563). D. M. Berwick.

*Room for Improvement: Patients Report on the Quality of Their Health Care* (#534). K. Davis, S. C. Schoenbaum, K. S. Collins, K. Tenney, D. L. Hughes, A. M. Audet.

*Quality of Health Care in the United States: A Chartbook* (#520). S. Leatherman, D. McCarthy.

### Medicare's Future

*Medicare Versus Private Insurance: Rhetoric and Reality* (#584). K. Davis, C. Schoen, M. M. Doty, K. Tenney.

*Modernizing Medicare Cost-Sharing: Policy Options and Impacts on Beneficiary and Program Expenditures* (#571). S. Maxwell, M. Storeygard, M. Moon.

*Medicare's Disabled Beneficiaries: The Forgotten Population in the Debate over Drug Benefits* (#573). B. Briesacher, B. Stuart, J. Doshi, S. Kamal-Bahl, D. Shea.

*Stretching Federal Dollars: Policy Trade-Offs in Designing a Medicare Drug Benefit with Limited Resources* (#544). M. Moon, M. Storeygard.

*Medicare+Choice after Five Years: Lessons for Medicare's Future* (#562). B. Biles, G. Dallek, A. Dennington.

### Minority Health/Quality of Care for Underserved Populations

*Cultural Competence in Health Care: Emerging Frameworks and Practical Approaches* (#576). J. R. Betancourt, A. R. Green, J. E. Carrillo.

*Providing Language Interpretation Services in Health Care Settings: Examples from the Field* (#541). M. Youdelman, J. Perkins.

*Diverse Communities, Common Concerns: Assessing Health Care Quality for Minority Americans* (#523). K. S. Collins, D. L. Hughes, M. M. Doty, B. L. Ives, J. N. Edwards, K. Tenney.

*Racial, Ethnic, and Primary Language Data Collection in the Health Care System: An Assessment of Federal Policies and Practices* (#492). R. T. Perot, M. Youdelman.

### Child Development and Preventive Care

*Partnering with Parents to Promote the Healthy Development of Young Children Enrolled in Medicaid* (#570). C. Bethell, C. Peck, M. Abrams, N. Halfon, H. Sareen, K. S. Collins.

*Primary Care Services: Promoting Optimal Child Development from Birth to Three Years* (#531). M. Regalado, N. Halfon.

### Quality of Care for Frail Elders

*Evaluation of the Wellspring Model for Improving Nursing Home Quality* (#550). R. I. Stone, S. C. Reinhard, B. Bowers, D. Zimmerman, C. D. Phillips, C. Hawes, J. A. Fielding, N. Jacobson.

### Task Force on Academic Health Centers

*Financial Performance of Academic Health Center Hospitals, 1994–2000* (#543). A. Dobson, L. Koenig, N. Sen, S. Ho, J. Gilani.

*Training Tomorrow's Doctors: The Medical Education Mission of Academic Health Centers* (#516). Commonwealth Fund Task Force on Academic Health Centers.

### Health Care in New York City

*Employer Health Coverage in the Empire State: An Uncertain Future* (#574). H. Whitmore, K. Dhont, J. Pickreign, J. Gabel, D. Sandman, C. Schoen.

*Health Coverage for Immigrants in New York: An Update on Policy Developments and Next Steps* (#546). D. Bachrach, K. Lipson.

*Healthy New York: Making Insurance More Affordable for Low-Income Workers* (#484). K. Swartz.

### International Health Policy and Practice

*Multinational Comparisons of Health Systems Data, 2002* (#582). G. F. Anderson, V. Petrosyan, P. S. Hussey.

*Comparison of Health Care System Views and Experiences in Five Nations, 2001* (#542). C. Schoen, R. J. Blendon, C. M. DesRoches, R. Osborn.