

NEWS RELEASE

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Asking Patients Is Best Way to Collect Accurate Racial and Ethnic Data

New Method Could Improve Efforts to Eliminate Health Care Disparities

New York, NY, February 22, 2006— New research published in the March *American Journal of Public Health* shows how health care providers' ability to effectively address disparities in health care could be enhanced by changing the way they collect information about their patients' race and ethnicity.

The Commonwealth Fund-supported study found that when hospital patients were asked to describe their race and ethnicity in their own words, they were more receptive to answering the question and gave more accurate answers. In fact, when compared to the traditional method of asking patients to identify with one of the standard categories for race and ethnicity provided by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), researchers found that allowing patients to use their own words resulted in more complete and usable information. Patients were less likely to choose the “unknown” or “other” category to identify themselves because they had the ability to be specific.

“What’s unique about this method is that it doesn’t force a patient into an inappropriate category, or leave out the data altogether because there isn’t a category that fits,” said Dr. David Baker, M.D., of Northwestern University, the study’s lead author. “Our research shows it’s a method that works better for patients and researchers.”

The researchers point out that research has shown that in the U.S., racial and ethnic minorities often receive lower quality of care than whites. “The first step toward addressing this problem is for health care providers to routinely collect data on patients’ race, ethnicity, and language and link these data to measures of quality, safety, and utilization,” say Baker and his colleagues in the article, “A System for Rapidly and Accurately Collecting Patients’ Race and Ethnicity.”

In addition to providing more accurate data, the new method proved efficient. Researchers determined that it is possible to accurately capture patients’ verbatim responses in an average of 37 seconds, just 17 seconds longer than the average time for completing the OMB questions.

Authors discovered that patients were more receptive to being asked for racial and ethnic data in this manner, especially when they were told that the information was going to be

used to ensure that all patients get the best care possible regardless of their race or ethnic background.

Researchers also noted that the flexibility that comes with collecting patient information in this way will allow health care providers to quickly identify and respond to emerging trends among very specific racial and ethnic groups.

“Good information about race and ethnicity is crucial to health care providers’ efforts to ensure that all patients receive equal levels of high quality health care,” said Anne Beal, M.D., the Fund’s Senior Program Officer for Programs on Quality of Care for Underserved Populations. “Adopting this new method can allow researchers and health care providers to more accurately determine the makeup of their patient population and to immediately identify new groups that are coming to health facilities.”

The Commonwealth Fund is a private foundation that supports independent research on health and social issues and makes grants to improve health care policy and practice