

An Evaluation Framework for Success in Health Care Reform

The President and the Congress are now working to develop substantial health care reforms. Whatever proposals are enacted, policymakers and the public will need on-going, accurate, and objective information about their benefits and costs. Given the scope and size of the health sector, its sensitivity to fluctuations of medical research, the exigencies of administrative and financing systems, and the inherent and intense interest of so many groups (both articulate and inarticulate), evaluation can play an important role in the implementation of the reform proposals.

Without the discipline of formal evaluation, decision makers will not be able to answer questions about the cost and coverage of insurance, access to care, effectiveness and long term savings of preventive care, quality of care, patient satisfaction with their care, trends in national health costs, and the equity and effectiveness of administrative mechanism such as “gateways” or “exchanges” now under consideration in the Congress. Promising reforms can evolve without needed midcourse corrections and favored but unproven “demonstrations” can become full blown programs without regard to their merits.

A robust evaluation program must be reflected in the plans, budgets, policies, administrative guidance, and organizations not just of the current Administration, but of future Administrations as well. For this to happen, an evaluation framework must be built into the authorizing legislation, with the following features:

- **Key evaluation questions** posed by the legislation regarding the effectiveness, efficiency, responsiveness, and equity of health insurance, public health, and health care delivery reforms covered by the health reform legislation.
- **Evaluation units** designated, or if necessary established, within Federal agencies responsible for the reforms to address the effectiveness and efficiency of their own health programs.
- **Independent assessments** by organizations like GAO or the Institutes of Medicine to address overarching evaluation questions about the health care system as a whole.
- **Annual evaluation plans** related to health reforms to be prepared by each agency with responsibility for health programs, including health insurance and services and preventive care. These plans should reflect the evolving nature of evaluation questions and related methodologies over the life cycle of the reforms.
- **Transparency** of evaluation findings through reports to the Congress and Executive Branch policy makers and dissemination to the public at large.
- **Budgets** sufficient to carry out these evaluation activities.
- **Anti fraud, waste, and abuse** mechanisms to protect beneficiaries and health care programs.
- **An annual national report card** on our nation’s health and health care system.