



To get better health care, BE INFORMED AND INVOLVED

Issue 6

This document is part of a series of information resources to help you get good quality health care.

Getting good quality care – why you can’t take it for granted

While we’d like to think that all health care is good quality care, there are actually big variations in the quality of care. Medical experts have done careful studies that measure the quality of care. They have found that **a good deal of health care does *not* measure up to quality standards.** They found many types of problems. For example:

- Some people do not get the types of tests and treatments that research has shown to work best for their condition. Instead, they are given tests or treatments that do not work as well.
- Some people cannot get the care they need or have delays in getting care that cause harm to their health.
- Some hospital patients develop new illnesses while they are in the hospital because the hospital has poor infection control.
- Sometimes mistakes are made, such as giving patients the wrong medicine.

What can *you* do to safeguard the quality of your care?

To help make sure that you and your family get good quality care, you need to be informed and actively involved. Below are some tips to help:

1

Choose doctors and other health care providers carefully

You want your doctors and other health care providers to be skilled and knowledgeable, of course. But that’s not enough – they should also be good at communicating with you. Do they listen carefully and explain things in a way that you can understand? Do they take your values and preferences into account and involve you in making decisions that affect your health? Do they spend enough time with you and make you feel comfortable about asking questions?

2

Find and use information about quality of care

Many types of information about health care quality have been written for patients. This information will help you understand what is meant by good quality care and help you make quality comparisons. Using this information can help you stay healthy and help you make good decisions about treatment if you get sick.

Learn More

Reference Issue 1, "Health information on the internet: A checklist to help you judge which websites to trust."

3

Be actively involved in making health care decisions and managing your health

It's your body, and you have **the right and responsibility** to understand your health conditions and treatment choices. This includes asking questions and participating in all decisions.

Medical care often has some risks as well as benefits. When you are facing a decision about your health care, you will need information that helps you make an informed choice. Ask your doctor whether there has been any scientific research on the risks and benefits of your treatment choices.

Learn More

A government publication called *Next Steps After Your Diagnosis: Finding Information and Support* provides general advice as well as tips and resources to help you learn more about your specific condition and how it can be treated. It was written by the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (www.ahrq.gov/consumer/diaginfo.htm).

4

Do what you can to help prevent medication mistakes

Medication mistakes are common, but there are many things you can do to help prevent them. Here are some safety tips:

- **Give your doctors and other health professionals the information they need to give you medicines that are safe for you.** Be sure they know about everything you are currently taking. This includes all prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements that you use. If a doctor prescribes a new medicine, ask if it is safe to use with your other medicines. If you are pregnant or nursing a baby, your doctor needs to know. If you have bad reactions or allergies to any medications, remind the doctor and pharmacist every time you get a new prescription.
- **Be sure that you know the purpose of the medicine.** Ask your doctor or other health professional to explain what the medicine is for and how it will help you.

- **When you pick up a prescription, check it carefully.** Is it what you were expecting? If it's a refill, does it look exactly the same as the medicine you had before? If something seems wrong, ask the pharmacist to double check it. Most errors are first found by patients.
- **Be sure that you understand how to use your medicines correctly.** Read the directions on the label and other information you get with your medicine. Have the pharmacist or doctor explain anything you do not understand. Ask what side effects you might have and which might be serious. Ask whether there other medicines, foods, or activities (such as driving or drinking alcohol) that you should avoid while using the medicine.
- **Follow the directions for taking your medicine.** Sometimes people want to stop taking their medicine as soon as they start feeling better, but this can sometimes be harmful. Check with your doctor before making any changes in taking your medicine.
- **Call your doctor** if your condition gets worse or if you have any concerns about your medication or side effects.

Learn More

These resources have more tips on safe use of medications:

- Websites run by the National Council on Patient Information and Education: www.talkaboutrx.org and www.bemedwise.org.
- A patient guide called *Your Medicine: Play It Safe* at the website of the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (www.ahrq.gov/consumer/safemeds/safemeds.htm).