Community Health Centers and Tobacco Cessation: First Steps

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This week is Community Health Center Week, as announced by the Department of Health and Human Services (click here). In 2011, the role that hospitals should play in tobacco cessation has been widely discussed because of the Joint Commission’s new tobacco measure set. But where do community health centers stand with tobacco cessation? Given that smoking is common among those who use community health centers, can tobacco cessation services be improved?

There is some good news. The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), which qualifies and funds community health centers, has incorporated four new clinical measures into its quality improvement program for FY2011 with reporting to begin in FY2012. Tobacco use assessment and counseling is one of the four. That HRSA’s Health Center Program quality improvement initiative has established tobacco cessation as a reportable performance measure will extend the reach of this important preventive service, as well as ensure alignment with the CMS Meaningful Use requirements for health information technology.

Last week Partnership for Prevention spoke with Seiji Hayashi, MD, who serves as Chief Medical Officer for the Bureau of Primary Health Care at HRSA. He confirmed that the clinical measure on tobacco cessation is in effect. After data is first submitted and reviewed in 2012, HRSA will better know where community health centers stand in terms of implementation/compliance. Dr. Hayashi emphasized that the initiative is in its initial stage and results will vary from center to center. He also said that all HRSA-funded health centers must report on the tobacco cessation measures as of next year; it is not optional.

It is Partnership for Prevention’s view that this is an excellent first step toward helping community health center patients stop smoking. However, the tobacco cessation services offered will not necessarily be comprehensive and further advocacy is needed to ensure that all counseling strategies and pharmacotherapy recommended by the Public Health Service are included as standards of care. To read a summary of the expansion of the performance measures initiative, click here.

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