

How to Keep Patients Out of the Hospital with Better Health and Lower Costs

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At its best, the American health care system delivers the most advanced and innovative medical care in the world. New medications, advanced technology and intensive interventions have dramatically reduced deaths from heart attacks, infectious diseases and other acute conditions. Heart disease, HIV, diabetes and many forms of cancer have been transformed into treatable, chronic conditions.

Chronic diseases are characterized by manageable symptoms cared for outside the hospital, interrupted by acute exacerbations that require hospitalization, emergency room visits and additional medications. Those acute episodes are costly and often drive long-term worsening of the disease. Many, if not most, of those acute episodes are preventable with better outpatient management of chronic disease.

Outpatient care is too frequently thought of as a simple, cheaper and less sophisticated form of care that serves primarily to bring patients into hospitals. In reality, comprehensive outpatient care is a sophisticated endeavor that raises the quality of care, eases suffering and improves millions of lives every day. Proposed cuts to funding for these activities (i.e., the proposed 22.4 percent cut to the 340b Drug Pricing Program) severely threaten institutions that provide comprehensive outpatient care.

An ideal model of outpatient care puts the patient at the center of a collaborative health care team. It uses sophisticated diagnostics and intensive treatments delivered at advanced facilities, followed by close collaboration with primary care providers to ensure continuity of care. This approach is more costly and intense than limited outpatient care, but pays substantial benefits in accurate diagnoses, better health and, over the long term, lower costs.

At National Jewish Health in Denver, and with our Respiratory Institute partners at Mount Sinai in New York

and Jefferson Health in Philadelphia, we focus on respiratory and related diseases, such as asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, which are chronic conditions. Our collaborative medical teams include not only pulmonologists, but also gastroenterologists, cardiologists, rheumatologists and immunologists who work together in one location and consult person to person about the whole patient.

Comprehensive outpatient care also addresses non-medical issues that can impact health. In our Comprehensive Respiratory Care Clinic, funded by a grant from Kaiser Permanente Colorado, patient navigators help underserved patients with transportation, child care and preparations for scheduled tests. They make sure patients understand their medications and how to take them. They

teach patients how to monitor their condition and to respond if their breathing worsens. A Quick Summary, usually sent to primary care physicians on the same day as

the clinic visit, documents what we did for the patient, what comes next and who is responsible. By getting patients, primary care providers and specialists all on the same page, care becomes less fragmented. There are fewer dropped balls, fewer missed appointments and fewer hospitalizations.

High-tech diagnostic tests and advanced treatments have greatly improved medical care and garnered the most support. However, the American health care system and the people it serves can benefit by fully valuing outpatient care, which combines advanced technology with less glamorous efforts to communicate and coordinate care, educate patients and address issues outside the hospital room. Comprehensive, coordinated outpatient care helps patients better manage their chronic conditions and stay out of the hospital. That's good for the cost of care and good for the health of the patient.

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One in a series of commentaries by leading physicians and researchers at National Jewish Health in Denver, Colorado. National Jewish Health is in New York City at the Mount Sinai | National Jewish Health Respiratory Institute and in Philadelphia at the Jane and Leonard Korman Respiratory Institute, Jefferson Health | National Jewish Health.