

*The Role of the Board in Quality Oversight and  
Status of the Imperative to Improve Healthcare Quality*

Elizabeth McGlynn, PhD

Associate Director, RAND Health, and Director, Center for Research on Quality of Care

On April 9, 2003, at an early morning governance briefing and again at an afternoon lecture sponsored by the Health Policy Institute, Elizabeth McGlynn, PhD, Associate Director, RAND Health, and Director, Center for Research on Quality of Care, offered her expert opinion on the *The Role of the Board in Quality Oversight and Status of the Imperative to Improve Healthcare Quality*

McGlynn offered her approach to moving the nation forward to develop a more comprehensive method for measuring quality of care, referring to the quality problem as one of “national denial.” None of the stakeholders is willing to be held accountable for the quality problem in the current complex practice of medicine, stated McGlynn. She spoke about the need to develop efficient and effective measurement and reporting systems that would help generate data and information to improve quality.

A nationally recognized expert on the measurement of technical quality, McGlynn led the development of a comprehensive, evidence-explicit system for quality assessment that can be used in managed care, medical group, and community settings. The system, known as QA (Quality Assessment) Tools, includes more than 500 quality of care indicators across 45 clinical areas for children and adults.

Dr. McGlynn discussed the limitations of the existing methods of measuring quality and stressed the need to develop more comprehensive quality measurement methods, including QA tools developed as a comprehensive measure of technical quality in the form of standards of care reviewed by experts from different clinical areas. She stated that quality can be assessed in terms of structural, technical competence, interpersonal and outcome measures, and no single data source is perfect for all quality assessments.

Dr. McGlynn referred to the IOM definition of quality, “The degree to which health services for individuals and populations increase the likelihood of desired health outcomes and are consistent with current professional knowledge.”

Published studies show variations in the delivery of care and deficits in the quality of care, said McGlynn. During the 1980s, with the rising health care costs, emphasis was on the overuse of services and appropriateness of surgical interventions. With increasing prevalence of managed care in the 90s, focus was brought on the under use of services. In 1998, the IOM report “To Err is Human” raised public awareness about medical errors and preventable deaths in the nations’ hospitals like never before. The 2002 IOM report “Unequal Treatment” described disparities in the quality of care delivered to racial and ethnic minorities.

Dr. McGlynn urged healthcare organizations to focus more on collaboration not competition. Although one organization can make a difference for individual patients, organizations that collaborate and learn from one another can transform the healthcare system, she stated. Dr. McGlynn referred to the Northern New England Cardiovascular Group, IHI Collaboratives, and Pittsburgh Regional Health Initiative as examples of successful venues to exchange ideas about different approaches. She warned healthcare systems to avoid the using 'cookie cutter' treatment protocols or becoming stuck in 'how we have always done things.'

Quality is everyone's problem, and each one of us is going to have an interaction with quality issues over our lifetimes, said McGlynn. We need to mobilize public opinion and develop tools and skills to shape effective responses. The solutions are not simple; commitment and leadership will be essential to address the quality problem. Dr. McGlynn urged Boards everywhere to demand that their organizations take responsibility and leadership in improving quality. "We need transformational change not boutique projects," she stated. McGlynn warned that this change "will require uncommon courage."

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