Health reform law will boost care quality, Sebelius says

The measure has made it easier to study innovations and make changes in how medical care is delivered, according to the HHS secretary.


The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act enacted in March will place a greater emphasis on improving the quality and safety of medical care in America, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius told about 6,000 health professionals and executives at the Institute for Healthcare Improvement's annual meeting in Orlando, Fla.

"Reform is not just about insurance," Sebelius said. "The law is also a serious platform for improving the quality of health care and changing the delivery system so we stop doing things that don't work for patients and start doing things which do work. It's about better care: care that is safe, timely, effective, efficient, equitable and patient-centered."

The reform law has made it easier for HHS and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services to study health care delivery innovations and make changes based on the results, Sebelius said in a news briefing after her speech on Dec. 7.

"We've had demonstration projects authorized before, but often they were very small and scattered and for a time-limited period," she said. "Now they'll be larger scale from the beginning, and we'll have the test results almost immediately, and we can make the payment reform. There won't be a two- or three-step process with a big delay in the middle. We can have very robust projects starting and then have the data collection systems we'll need to implement them more quickly."

Prominent health care executives at the institute's news briefing said the Affordable Care Act will put quality and safety in the spotlight.

"The really big reform that needs to happen is care reform," said George Halvorson, CEO of Kaiser Permanente, the Oakland, Calif.-based health plan. "We can do a better job of caring for people with chronic conditions, do a better job of connecting caregivers, get better science about care delivery."

"If you look at the health care reform bill, there are about 2,000 'shall's' in the bill. Over 60% of them deal with care. If you look at the long-term impact of the bill on America, it really deals with care delivery."

Halvorson said the appointment of Donald M. Berwick, MD, former CEO of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, as CMS administrator sent a clear message about how quality soon will take center stage in health policy discussions. That will translate into payment changes and reward organizations that are performing well on quality, said Lee Carter, chair of the board of trustees at the Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center.

"At Cincinnati Children's, as we've improved quality, we've improved the bottom line," Carter said. "I still get pushback in talking about the business case for quality in health care. People say, 'There is no business case for quality.' I look at them and say, 'I really feel sorry for you. Those of us who know there is will prosper, and those who think there isn't will be left behind.' "

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