



January 28, 2010

The Honorable Barack H. Obama
President of the United States
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. President:

The National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) applauds your tireless efforts to improve our country's health care system. The need for reform is clear. We pay too much for care that is not of consistently high quality and we leave far too many of our fellow citizens without coverage. We remain hopeful that an agreement can be reached on a set of reforms that begin to address these pressing needs.

As the nation's leading evaluator of health care quality, NCQA is particularly eager to improve the clinical quality of care delivered to Americans. Numerous studies have shown that patients are not receiving the right care at the right time. These flaws drive underuse of needed services, overuse of unnecessary care, avoidable emergency room admissions, redundant tests, and medical errors. There are also tremendous gaps in our knowledge of how to deliver the best quality care. As a result, we are losing lives and wasting billions of dollars. It is imperative that we move forward with solutions that health policy experts across the political spectrum agree will begin to improve the value of dollars we spend on medical services.

Many of the needed reforms are present in the House and Senate bills. Those provisions have strong bipartisan support, require modest upfront investment, and are scored by the Congressional Budget Office to save billions of dollars. Taken together, these changes represent an unprecedented investment in improving the quality of care for all Americans – those with insurance and those without.

Specifically, we urge you to enact the following policy changes:

Value-Based Purchasing. Numerous provisions of the pending bills would change Medicare payment systems to more closely link what is paid to the quality of the care delivered. These changes are long overdue and will result in better and more efficient care. Efforts by private insurers, Medicare and Medicaid have demonstrated the effectiveness of these approaches. Quality measurement data submitted to CMS and to NCQA have not improved significantly in recent years. We need stronger incentives to improve quality.

Patient-Centered Medical Homes. Our care delivery system is fragmented. There is little coordination among providers across the sub-specialty spectrum. Experts agree this lack of coordination and accountability has costly ramifications, and leaves patients floundering in the complexities of our medical system, especially those with chronic illnesses. CMS, under the Tax Relief and Health Care Act (TRHCA) of 2006, currently has the authority to move forward with a national demonstration project to test a promising model known as the Patient Centered Medical Home. This model would provide all types of patients with a primary care medical home that would coordinate their care, offer enhanced hours of access,

store patients' health information in electronic health records and registries, and provide care in a culturally and linguistically sensitive manner. NCQA has recognized more than 400 practices across the country and hundreds more are ready to join this exciting movement. CMS should proceed with the TRHCA demonstration project, a similar model of care should be available to Medicaid patients, and public payers should continue to participate in private-sector multi-payer demonstration projects.

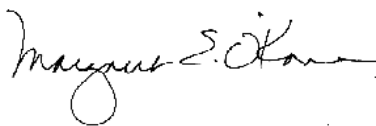
Accountable Care Organizations. Another model of care that could improve our fragmented delivery system is the accountable care organization (ACO), which puts in place strong financial incentives to reward coordination of care across specialties and settings. Such organizations as the Mayo Clinic, the Geisinger Health System, Kaiser Permanente and the Cleveland Clinic have demonstrated improved care and reduced costs. Both bills would test these approaches more broadly.

Delivery System Innovations. The only way we, as a nation, will succeed in changing the troublesome trends in health care spending is to begin to change the way care is delivered. The House and Senate have called for the creation of a new Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation to test a number of approaches to care delivery. As prescribed by both bills, CMS should have the flexibility to experiment with promising new models, and scale these projects if the CMS actuary can certify they improve quality and restrain costs. As the single largest payers for medical care in the U.S., Medicare and Medicaid have the ability to develop innovative approaches that can be adopted by private sector leaders.

Performance Measurement. Over the last 20 years, NCQA and others have developed a series of measures of clinical quality and patient experience that have saved millions of lives and billions of dollars. But there is still much we do not know and our nation lacks a coordinated strategy to attack those gaps. Determining what approaches to care yield the best health outcomes must form the basis of a renewed payment system. This can only work if we have performance measures that ask the right questions. Congress should invest, as both reform bills call for, in research and development of performance measures that appropriately measure the care plans and providers offer. Expanding our knowledge base in this manner can enable value-based purchasing, evidence-based medicine standards, and reward high-performing systems. A coalition of more than 200 national organizations has embraced a bipartisan effort to take the needed steps.

We cannot afford to delay attempts to reverse the accelerating cost and declining quality trends in our health care system. We stand ready to work with you, and members of Congress from both parties, to bring forth broadly agreed upon solutions that could begin to improve immediately the quality of care millions of Americans experience. Based on our twenty-year record as leading quality experts and advocates, we hope you will give our recommendations serious consideration.

Sincerely,



Margaret E. O'Kane
President

cc: The Honorable Harry Reid, The Honorable Mitch McConnell, The Honorable Nancy Pelosi, The Honorable John Boehner