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HHS Will 'Hold Ourselves Accountable' On Plan To Lessen Health Disparities

The KHN Interview by Mary Agnes Carey, KHN Staff Writer | April 18, 2011

The Department of Health and Human Services recently unveiled a comprehensive strategy to reduce health disparities among racial and ethnic minorities (<http://www.minorityhealth.hhs.gov/npa/>).

Dr. Garth N. Graham, HHS deputy assistant secretary for minority health, spoke with KHN's Mary Agnes Carey to talk about the plan and its role in the health care system. Below are edited excerpts of that interview.

Among its goals, HHS aims to recruit more undergraduates from underserved communities for public health and biomedical science careers, improve health care interpreting and translation services and reduce the incidence of cardiovascular disease, childhood obesity and tobacco-related diseases in minority communities.

HHS officials said the plan builds on provisions in the health overhaul law and represents the most comprehensive effort ever at HHS to address racial and ethnic health care disparities. In addition, HHS will step up its efforts to gather and analyze data about health issues in minority communities.

What are health care disparities and why should people care about this issue?

Health care disparities are differences in health outcomes between various populations. We see that Hispanic Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans sometimes are affected by certain diseases disproportionately compared to the rest of the population. If diseases disproportionately affect a certain community, it makes that community less productive and less able to contribute overall. If we want to have health equity in our country, we want to make sure all populations achieve a similar life expectancy.

Does this mean that certain groups of people suffer more from illnesses such as heart disease or diabetes, or are there also disparities in how these illnesses are treated?

Both. You see higher incidence of diabetes, hypertension and heart disease in minority communities but you also see disparities in treatment. There's data to show certain minority communities, even when they present with similar symptoms, are less likely to get certain interventions across the board.

How will you know if the plan is working?

We will hold ourselves accountable in general, and the plan is going to be updated on a yearly basis where we will track certain measures to see where we've gone and what we've done. If strategies don't work we will have to retool and go in a different direction. We are going to be very public whether progress has been made or not.



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What does the health law do to reduce health care disparities?

There are specific provisions around workforce diversity, cultural competency and improving data collection so we have get better data on minority populations. And of course the fact that we are going to be expanding health insurance will benefit minority populations because they overwhelmingly make up the ranks of the uninsured.

What will you do with the data you collect?

It will tell us a better story. If you were to just look at the Asian American population overall, you would think there might be a lot of homogeneity and you wouldn't be able to tell a lot about the health care disparities within the Asian American population. Once we are able to do that we can target our resources better and be able to create change.

What is cultural competency?

It is making sure the health care practitioner or organization understands the history, understands the cultural background of that patient and how it might affect health care outcomes.

Five years from now, what will the health care disparity issue look like in America?

We're hoping in five years we will see more narrowing of the gap between minority populations and others. The short term goal is to see an impact in health care outcomes in minority populations through these actions. We want to be very transparent about the results. When we do our annual reviews we want to have people see where we are. We are making ourselves transparent to be able to show all those organizations who worked with us just where we are.

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