

National Survey Demonstrates Low Consumer Knowledge and Mistrust of Prevention Guidelines

More than One-Third Believe that the Government Uses Guidelines to Ration Health Care

New York, New York, March 14, 2016—How well do US consumers understand clinical preventive services and their guidelines? Not terribly well, says a new [study](#) published in the March 2016 issue of *The Milbank Quarterly* that surveyed adults about their knowledge of and attitude toward government-sponsored preventive care guidelines, such as cancer-screening tests.

The survey, conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan and George Washington University, found that while participants had low levels of knowledge and trust for clinical service guidelines, about half thought it was important for health care providers to follow guidelines when advising patients and that research should be the most important factor when crafting guidelines.

“Patients play an important role in their own health care, especially when it comes to getting preventive services like screening tests, immunizations, and checkups,” says lead author Paula Lantz from the University of Michigan. “Our study results suggest that very few people understand guidelines for who should be getting specific preventive services and how often. We also found that people do not always trust their health care provider’s recommendation to not get a screening test, even when that recommendation is based on the best research and expert opinion.”

Background

The Affordable Care Act (ACA) requires that most health insurance plans cover specified clinical preventive services without cost-sharing, including some recommended by the US Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF). Because the USPSTF’s recommendations have a greater role in insurance benefit design, it is now even more important that consumers understand how these evidence-based recommendations are developed. When preventive service guidelines no longer support routine use—such as the USPSTF’s recommendations against prostate cancer screening, mammography for women in their 40s, and annual PAP test screening—criticism and controversy follow. Both the underuse and overuse of clinical preventive services relative to evidence-based guidelines are a public health concern.

Findings

The Internet-based, nationally-representative survey of 2,529 adults found that:

- 53.4% agreed that it is important for providers to follow guidelines when they advise patients and that research should be the most important factor when crafting guidelines (50.6%)
- 36.4% reported knowing that the ACA required insurance companies to cover proven preventive services without cost sharing, but only 7.7 % had heard of the USPSTF
- One in three reported trusting that a government task force would make fair guidelines

- 38.2% believed that the government uses guidelines to ration health care.

Participants were also asked about two clinically realistic vignettes concerning patients asking physicians for cancer-screening tests that are not currently recommended for patients described in the scenarios. In both examples, the results revealed that very few respondents believed that a patient should simply accept a physician's recommendation not to have a cancer-screening test, even when it is based on USPSTF's current guidelines. The researchers used the survey data to design and test communication strategies to increase the public's knowledge of and positive attitude toward evidence-based preventive services and to reduce uncertainty among patients when guidelines change or are controversial.

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