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How Well Do Americans Understand Low-Value Tests and Treatments?

New York, New York, March 7, 2017—When it comes to medical care, patients and the public often think that more is better. Yet, it's well-documented that as much as 30% of US health care may be unnecessary, including tests that are used too often and treatments that are prescribed too quickly, like unnecessary antibiotics. A new [study](#) in the March 2017 issue of *The Milbank Quarterly* by Mark Schlesinger of the Yale University School of Public Health and Rachel Grob of the University of Wisconsin (Madison) Center for Patient Partnerships and Medical School offers fresh insight into how Americans think about “value” in health care. The researchers found that the public’s awareness of low-value care is incomplete, with disparities related to race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Media messaging can enhance understanding and reduce disparities, most effectively by emphasizing the health threats of excess testing and the promise that doctors who test less might communicate with their patients more.

Background

The Choosing Wisely Campaign, an initiative launched in 2012 by the American Board of Internal Medicine, represents an effort by physicians to reduce low-value care through public education campaigns. Five years later, there is little evidence about the public’s basic understanding of low-value care, the perceived risks and benefits of low-value tests or treatments, or the impact of media messages on the public’s awareness or attitudes. This study begins to address these gaps.

Findings

The researchers used a mixed-methods design incorporating focus groups; interviews with patients on their interactions with physicians; a national survey of 920 respondents on awareness of low-value care; and a survey experiment with 785 participants, testing the impact of media messages on attitudes about low-value care, treatment choices, and selection of a primary care clinician. They found that:

- One-third of Americans currently cannot envision benefits from avoiding low-value care, characterized by unnecessary tests and treatments. That figure increases to half for less educated and minority respondents.
- Most Americans who anticipate benefits from avoiding low-value care hope that less testing and treatment will be replaced with more interactive and personalized care.
- Given an explicit choice, many Americans are inclined to avoid common forms of low-value care like unnecessary antibiotics or excess imaging for lower-back pain, but few intentionally choose clinicians who avoid these practices.
- After exposure to messages emphasizing the health risks of low-value tests and treatments, Americans across all socio-demographic groups are more likely to avoid such care.

The researchers note that in the long run, public support for reducing low-value care can be most effectively promoted by a shift in focus which de-emphasizes avoidance of specific tests and treatments and highlights the benefits that would accrue to patients if clinicians spent less time on unnecessary routinized procedures and more time on personalized care.

About *The Milbank Quarterly*

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