

ANOTHER STEP ALONG THE WAY TO UNDERSTANDING PRIMARY CARE

Primary care improves overall performance of health care systems

In late 1996 the US Institute of Medicine reported the results of a two-year study focused on the future of primary care, entitled *Primary Care: America's Health in a New Era*. This study was conducted by a diverse group including representation from health plans, health maintenance organisations, dentistry, nursing, medicine (including obstetrics, internal medicine, pediatrics, family medicine, and European general practice), public health, health economics and those seeking to measure the quality of health care services.

The methods used in the study included expert testimony, public testimony, workshops on the science base of primary care and the primary care workforce, commissioned papers, urban and rural site visits from Minnesota to Texas and California to Massachusetts to North Carolina, and comprehensive literature reviews. Early on in the study it became clear that there is considerable confusion as to what primary care is, and an interim report was filed that offered a definition of primary care.

This definition is:

"Primary care is the provision of integrated, accessible health care services by clinicians who are accountable for addressing a large majority of personal health care needs, developing a sustained partnership with patients, and practicing in the context of family and community."

As you would expect, not everyone fully agrees with the definition, but this definition has now been "in play" long enough in the United States to know that most people like it and think it is appropriate. (An exception is a subgroup of the AMA which rejects the definition because it uses the word clinician instead of physician.) This definition considers primary care to be a function, this complex function seems to be necessary in successful health care systems, and it is usually accomplished through teamwork involving people from various disciplines and backgrounds.

Primary care is neither so easy anyone can do it, nor so hard no one can do it. It is still largely undeveloped and doing it well represents one of the most important challenges facing those who seek to improve the health status of populations. Relationships that are interdependent are involved in primary care with the clinician-patient relationship being central. This implies that whatever besets the community and concerns individuals defines the content of primary care.

This definition provided the framework for the rest of the study. Using this definition the final report of this study, based on the evidence amassed, concluded that research indicates that primary care improves the overall performance of health care systems. More specifically:

1. When people have primary care, treatment occurs before evolution to more severe problems.
2. When people have primary care, emergency room utilisation and hospital admissions decrease.
3. Primary care clinicians use fewer tests and spend less money.

4. Particularly for the poor, access to primary care is associated with improved vision, more complete immunisation, better blood pressure control, enhanced dental status and reduced estimated mortality.
5. Countries with health systems more oriented toward primary care generally achieve better health status (eg. in terms of low birth weight, neonatal mortality, life expectancy, years of potential life lost). This better health status is achieved with higher patient satisfaction, lower per capita expenditures and lower medication use.
6. Primary care clinicians and subspecialty physicians both fail to achieve preventive service guidelines, but people with a regular source of primary care receive more preventive services.
7. Higher levels of primary care in a geographic area are associated with lower mortality rates. This holds after controlling for effects of urban-rural differences, poverty rates, education and lifestyle factors.

This is impressive. It appears that primary care makes a positive difference. Primary care is valuable because it provides people

with access to appropriate services at reduced costs, with satisfying results. Regrettably, the evidence about primary care is not prolific. Prospective measurements of the impact of primary care are woefully lacking and the literature comparing primary care with specialty care for selected conditions is a tortured and inadequate literature, begging for dispassionate expansion. Nonetheless, we presently live in a world that has recognised that primary care is central to effective health care systems.

No place is the need and opportunity for primary care as visible as in rural communities where the primary care system is often the only locus of personal health care services. The absence or paucity of

specialty services may impede clinical care in rural areas, but this situation also reveals primary care undistorted by factors that may disguise or hide primary care in urban settings. This means that rural clinicians have both a special opportunity and a special obligation to discover primary care and teach it to others. Indeed, the future of primary care depends to an important extent upon rural clinicians who can expand the requisite knowledge base, implement robust delivery models and prepare next generations of clinicians for rural practice.

We are all travellers in a journey that wanders across our planet in search of best ways to care for people and improve the health status of populations. Primary care is not *the* answer to every question or concern nor is it a substitute for public health and other levels of personal health care service. But primary care as defined does seem to be an essential component of successful health care systems and it is very difficult to imagine an adequate health care system without primary care.

We have arrived at another step along the way in our understanding of primary care and on the horizon awaiting us is new knowledge that will improve primary care. Rural clinicians are particularly well positioned to lead and stimulate this next renaissance of discovery and their work will change clinical practice for everyone. ●

Green LA, MD
Williams R, MD