

# The Voice

The Newsletter of NAMI Southwestern Pennsylvania

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## Quality in Behavioral Health Treatment and Supports: What is quality anyway?

The word “quality” is used often in our daily lives. We might use it to express our opinion of theatrical performance or the performance of a car, or to describe the outcome of a service. We all want “good quality” experiences, products or services. Yet, what precisely do we mean by “good quality” and “poor quality”? What exactly is quality? As often as we use it, have we ever stopped to think about what the word really means to us?

Does quality mean: conformance to established standards; or is it the standard of excellence or superiority; reliability; the relationship of cost to value; or craftsmanship? Perhaps a useful definition for our purposes might be: “Quality is performance excellence as viewed by all stakeholders.” We all know what we want our health systems to deliver: “the right care for the right person at the right time”.

Over the last decade, there has been increased attention by policymakers, payers, purchasers, clinicians, consumers and family members on the quality and efficiency of healthcare in the United States. These longstanding initiatives to improve the quality of health care in the United States have largely neglected mental health. For example, in a recent national report on quality measurement published by the Agency for Healthcare Quality and Research, only four of 179 quality measurements pertained to mental health.

With this in mind, the NAMI Southwestern Pennsylvania Annual Regional Conference will focus on determining quality in behavioral

health. Make plans to join with us on April 21, 2007 at the Pittsburgh Airport Marriott Hotel to engage in discussions with nationally known experts in developing quality indicators and implementing true quality into mental health treatment, services, and community supports that will promote recovery. (See page 9 for a detailed description and registration information for the 2007 NAMI Southwestern Pennsylvania Regional Conference).

Researchers and quality improvement professionals consistently refer to identifying specific domains of quality with regards to healthcare. What exactly are these domains, and why are they relevant?

**Domains of quality** -The technical aspect of the process of healthcare to which a benchmark, measure or other tool applies. These domains allow stakeholders to identify the best practice standards we ought to consistently expect from clinicians and service providers. This includes:

- Prevention - Screening or other clinical methods to prevent the occurrence or worsening of a health condition
- Access - Availability of services, ease or difficulty of obtaining them, barriers (linguistic or cultural issues, geographic proximity, delays, etc.) that may be encountered
- Assessment - Patient evaluations, including diagnostic, side effect, safety, medical and co-morbidity issues
- Treatment - The appropriate selection, dose, duration and intensity of a health care intervention
- Continuity - Capacity of caregivers to maintain the patient’s treatment during transitions between levels of care
- Coordination - Capacity of members of the patient’s treatment team to interact with others inside and

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outside of the team to ensure that the diverse needs of the patient are addressed

- Safety - Issues of patient safety, including injuries, medication errors, avoidable adverse events, and the use of seclusion or restraint

### **Three Steps for Improving the Quality of Mental Health Care**

As cited in “What Is Necessary to Transform the Quality of Mental Health Care,” Health Affairs, Nov. 2006, an analysis by a team of researchers from RAND and UCLA makes a case for ways to accelerate progress in improving the quality of mental health care. The researchers identify three steps:

#### **1. Expand the pool of effective programs and adapt them to a broader range of settings.**

An important step for improving mental health care involves increasing the range of disorders, ages, and groups for which effective programs exist and adapting programs to more diverse groups and service settings. The strongest quality improvement programs to date in mental health have centered on treating depression in well-established, organized primary care settings. But further progress is needed to adapt these programs to most current practice settings. Another clear need is coordination of quality improvement for common disorders that are treated in multiple settings. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in children offers one example. Provider settings include primary care, specialty care, schools, juvenile justice, foster care, and other institutions serving children. Improving quality will require creating more flexible and integrated behavioral and physical healthcare settings within the community.

#### **2. Improve the infrastructure for delivering evidence-based treatment.**

To realize gains from better-quality tools, the mental health care system needs better structure for service delivery to provide higher-quality care. The profession needs strong leadership to develop standards and minimum competency requirements. There are currently gaps in the system, such as a lack of accountability mechanisms that hinder quality improvement. There are no standards or certification requirements for various kinds of treatments, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, and consumers have no easy way to identify practitioners who deliver the best quality care. Market forces could then be harnessed to disseminate and promote standards, requirements, and best practices. For example, large behavioral health “carve-out” insurance firms can provide financial incentives for providers to seek additional training that meets evidence-based requirements.

#### **3. Promote innovation in financing.**

Financial incentives can either spur or impede the adoption

of quality improvement programs, but effective financing tools for this purpose have not yet been fully developed in mental health. Innovations in financing need to account for the system’s complexity — service is provided via two systems, either public or private — while supporting a responsible infrastructure in which service access, efficiency, and quality are core values. One innovative approach is pay-for-performance, which links salary bonuses or other financial incentives for providers to quality indicators, such as patient satisfaction.

### **Helping You Choose Quality Behavioral Health Care**

Behavioral health care services refer to a continuum of services and settings that serve individuals and families across the life span. Begin your search for quality in treatment by talking with families and peers with similar needs to identify several behavioral health care organizations. If time permits, visit each one and talk with the staff about the organization’s services, policies, history and staff credentials. Then use the following questions to help you determine whether the organization meets your needs.

Selecting quality behavioral health care services requires special thought and attention. The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) has prepared the following checklist to assist you in making your selection. Knowing what to look for and what to ask will help you choose an organization that provides safe, quality care, treatment and services to meet your needs.

#### **Philosophy and qualifications**

- What is the organization’s service philosophy? Ask about the nature and goals of the program and what kind of clients it is designed to serve. What is the organization’s experience in helping a person like me?
- Is the staff well qualified and experienced? Ask about staff credentials (education, training and licensure).
- Does the organization create an individualized plan based on assessed needs? The plan of care should be updated as the needs of the client changes.
- Does the organization develop a discharge plan to ensure appropriate services are provided after the individual leaves the program? How does the organization choose the other programs or agencies to refer consumers to?
- What interventions are utilized in the organization and what is the organization’s philosophy on their use?

## Quality issues

- Does the organization have a quality improvement program?
- How does the organization ensure that care, treatment and services are delivered safely?
- Does a nationally recognized accrediting body such as The Joint Commission accredit the organization? Joint Commission accreditation means the organization voluntarily sought accreditation and met national health and safety standards.

## Focus on consumer and family

- Are adult consumers the key drivers in decisions about their own care, treatment and services?
- Are the buildings and grounds suitable to the nature of the services provided and the age of the individuals receiving treatment and support services? Is there adequate space and ventilation? Is the facility clean? Does it provide a positive atmosphere?
- Does the organization take time to explain consumer rights and responsibilities? Ask to see a copy of the organization's rights and responsibilities information.
- Does the organization have a procedure for receiving and resolving consumer complaints and the family

concerning the quality of care? Ask for details.

- How does the organization communicate with the families of consumers?
- How does the organization communicate with foster families?

Transformation of mental health service delivery and policy is occurring at every level. NAMI members must use our collective voice to ensure that this transformation incorporates quality. A full continuum of evidence based treatment, services and community supports is necessary to foster recovery for all individuals, allowing folks to live richer lives in the communities of their choice. The body of existing research indicates that engaging the public across a diverse group of stakeholders — including consumers and their family members along with providers, payers, policymakers, researchers, and professional organizations — is central to implementing true quality improvement in behavioral healthcare. Contact the NAMI office to learn how you can assist us in these efforts. ☺