



Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality: Reauthorization

Background

On December 6, 1999, President Clinton signed the Healthcare Research and Quality Act of 1999, reauthorizing the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research (AHCPR) until the end of fiscal year 2005. The authorizing legislation establishes Federal agencies and programs and outlines their roles and responsibilities. Reauthorization — the process of renewing an agency's original legislation — gives Congress an opportunity to make changes to the original roles and responsibilities it outlined. AHCPR has been operating without an authorization since 1995, but it has received operating funds through the congressional appropriations process.

Significant Changes

One of the most visible changes resulting from the Act is that AHCPR will now be known as the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ). The new law also changes the title of the Administrator of AHCPR to the Director of AHRQ. The new name is significant because it:

- Reaffirms that AHRQ is a scientific research agency.
- Corrects the misperception that the Agency determines Federal health care policies and

regulations by removing "policy" from the Agency name.

- Adds the word "quality" to the Agency's name, thus establishing AHRQ as the lead Federal agency on quality of care research, with new responsibility to coordinate all Federal quality improvement efforts and health services research. The Agency has been fulfilling this function since 1998 through its leadership role in the Federal Quality Interagency Coordination (QuIC) Task Force.

This legislation eliminates a requirement that the Agency support the development of clinical practice guidelines. The Agency ended its clinical guidelines program in 1996. It now supports the development of evidence reports through its 12 Evidence-based Practice Centers and the dissemination of evidence-based guidelines through the Agency's National Guideline Clearinghouse.

Overarching Philosophy

The legislation also positions the Agency as a "science partner," working collaboratively with the public and private sectors to improve the quality and safety of patient care. Under the legislation AHRQ will:

- Meet the information needs of its customers — patients and clinicians, health system leaders, and policymakers — so that they can make more informed health care decisions.
- Build the evidence base for what works and doesn't work in health care and develop the information, tools, and strategies that decision-makers can use to make good decisions and provide high-quality health care based on evidence.
- Develop scientific knowledge in these areas but will not mandate guidelines or standards for measuring quality.

Research Priorities

The Act affirms the Agency's existing goals and research priorities: support improvement in health outcomes; strengthen quality measurement and improvement; and identify strategies to improve access, foster appropriate use, and reduce unnecessary expenditures. More specifically, the legislation directs AHRQ to:

- *Improve the quality of health care by:*
 1. Coordinating, conducting, and supporting research, demonstrations, and evaluations related to the

AHRQ, a part of the U.S. Public Health Service, is the lead agency charged with supporting research designed to improve the quality of health care, reduce its cost, improve patient safety, decrease medical errors, and broaden access to essential services. AHRQ sponsors and conducts research that provides evidence-based information on health care outcomes; quality; and cost, use, and access. The information helps health care decisionmakers—patients and clinicians, health system leaders, and policymakers—make more informed decisions and improve the quality of health care services.

