Advancing Health Information Technology, Patient Care, and Quality Measurement

NATIONAL QUALITY FORUM

The National Quality Forum (NQF) improves the nation's health and healthcare through measurement. NQF brings together the best available evidence, science, and expertise to review, endorse, and recommend measures for use in public and private accountability programs. These accountability programs include pay-for-performance and public reporting initiatives, among others, and provide incentives for high-quality care. In its work, NQF benefits from the involvement of its more than 430 member organizations representing the full spectrum of healthcare, and some 850 volunteers that include the nation's quality experts.

NQF IS ADVANCING THE USE OF HEALTH IT to improve health and healthcare. Two new projects will develop approaches for assessing health IT interoperability and measuring the quality of telehealth services.

NQF'S HEALTH IT INITIATIVES

Electronic health records (EHRs) and other health information technology (IT) systems hold great promise to make healthcare higher quality, safer, more affordable, and better coordinated. Yet barriers to this future vision exist, including lack of health IT interoperability, questions about the efficacy of health IT enabled care delivery such as telehealth, unintended safety issues related to health IT, and comparability issues with electronic clinical quality measures, or eMeasures. NQF's health IT initiatives are designed to address these and other issues to advance 21st century healthcare empowered by health IT that improves health and healthcare for the nation.

FOUNDATIONAL WORK IN INTEROPERABILITY, TELEHEALTH UNDERWAY

NQF is undertaking foundational work to help the quality community assess and make further progress toward interoperability—the efficient, secure communication of information between providers' computer-based systems. The project, to be completed by September 2017, will develop a measurement structure and related measure concepts to help better understand and resolve the issues preventing the seamless exchange of data between diverse health IT systems. Ready exchange of data between different systems is needed to integrate and coordinate care and ultimately to improve patient outcomes.

In another foundational project, NQF is beginning work to develop methods for assessing the quality of telehealth. Telehealth is the use of technology to deliver healthcare, health information, or health education at a distance. NQF will examine how best to apply clinical measures to telehealth healthcare encounters and develop a framework for measuring the quality of telehealth, which has grown substantially in a variety of care settings—but especially in rural areas—over the past 15 years. NQF also will develop an approach for measuring nonclinical areas of telehealth, such as access to care and cost effectiveness. This project will be completed by August 2017.

GUIDANCE ON PATIENT SAFETY AND HEALTH IT PROVIDED

Health IT may reduce medical errors and facilitate the collection and reporting of eMeasures to improve patient care. Yet, it can also create new hazards

related to unintended consequences of these technologies. In September of 2014, NQF initiated a project to assess how to measure patient safety events involving health IT, construct a measurement framework to reduce potential risk, and advance the framework to improve the safety of health IT.

A multistakeholder Committee of health IT experts recommended that measures that address the safe use of health IT focus on these high-level concepts to ensure:

- **Safe Health IT**—it is accessible and usable on demand by all members of a care team and that personal health data are complete, accurate, secure, and protected;

- **Using Health IT Safely**—its features and functionality within a clinical setting are effective, efficient, and implemented as intended; that there are structures, processes, and procedures in place to ensure the safe use of health IT; and that there are effective mechanisms to monitor, detect, and report on both the safety and safe use of health IT; and

- **Improving Patient Safety**—it is leveraged to reduce patient harm and improve the safety of patient care as well as enable meaningful and effective patient engagement.

The NQF framework sets the foundation for future efforts by measure developers, researchers, and others in the healthcare community. These may include developing patient safety related health IT measures, implementing quality improvement interventions to address issues identified in the report, and helping to shape EHR and other vendors' product design.

VETTING AND IMPROVING eMEASURES FOR SAFER CARE

eMeasures are clinical quality measures in a specific electronic format that EHRs can use to capture, store, and transmit data electronically. eMeasures are important tools for quality improvement used in the CMS Meaningful Use program and other national reporting initiatives. NQF has endorsed eMeasures in the areas of mental health, diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular care, and medication management.

A recent NQF project assessed the quality of the building blocks of eMeasures, or value sets, and called for more standardization of the clinical content for eMeasures so that they are consistent and comparable. For example, the use of standard vocabulary terms for diagnoses of conditions such as diabetes is an important contributor to standardized measures. Value sets also enable the implementation of measures in an accurate and consistent way across different IT systems.

MOVING FORWARD

Advancing the safety and safe use of health IT requires stakeholders to share responsibility and accountability as well as a substantial cultural shift for the groups involved in the development and use of health IT systems. NQF's recommendations and conceptual framework for health IT safety will continue to evolve as evidence, practices, and technologies mature.

As part of its work to evaluate and endorse eMeasures in new areas, NQF will look to opportunities to standardize the underlying value sets used by eMeasures as a part of the endorsement process. Meanwhile, NQF looks forward to issuing recommendations related to telehealth and interoperability in late 2017.