

## Too Much Treatment, Not Enough Health Care

By Gregory S. Cohn, M.D.

It is no secret that there are many problems with our current health care system. Despite spending substantially more money per person on health care than any other country, health outcomes in the US, such as life expectancy, infant mortality, and others, are the same or worse than those in other countries. Thus, when it comes to certain aspects of medical care in the US, *more is actually less*. Support for this conclusion comes from a recently published study, the 2008 Dartmouth Atlas of Health Care. The authors of this study reviewed the medical records of almost 5 million Medicare patients at thousands of different hospitals across the country during the years 2001-2005. What they found was that there was tremendous variation in the way patients with serious illnesses were treated during the last two years of their lives. Specifically, some regions of the country used 2-3 times the medical and financial resources compared to others. Interestingly, while patients treated in these “medically aggressive” regions had more tests and procedures, and saw more specialists, they **didn’t live longer or have a better quality of life than those that received more conservative treatment!** In addition, these same aggressively treated patients were at greater risk for infectious complications and medical errors (stemming from uncoordinated care), and **were the least satisfied with their health care**. While this “contradiction” is most easily seen in those with serious and/or chronic illnesses, it is also true for the remainder of the population as well.

The above findings may come as a shock to most people. In fact, one of the biggest fears for many is that their illness will be undertreated, or that their insurance will not cover the cost of newer (i.e. more expensive) treatments. While there are multiple explanations that could bias this study’s findings, everyday experience in our current system supports their truth. I would like to offer two pieces of advice that may help when faced with a medical problem. First, have a thorough discussion with your physician before undergoing any major tests or interventions. Doctors and patients need to be very clear about what benefits or information can be gained, and weigh that against any potential risks. Just because a test or procedure *can* be done, doesn’t mean that it *should be done*. If the test or procedure would not result in a change of therapy, then it may not be necessary. Second, the study also found that areas with better quality health care generally had higher concentrations of primary care providers. There is **no substitute** for a solid relationship with a qualified primary physician, who can focus on the *whole person*, and help coordinate care with other specialists. With this type of relationship, there may also be a greater chance for health care to be *proactive*, rather than *reactive*. Finally, overall health can be improved, and the need for medical intervention minimized, by eating a healthy diet, exercising regularly, and maintaining a normal weight.

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