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## Press Release

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### **SURVEY SHOWS THAT MEDICAL ERRORS AND MALPRACTICE ARE AMONG PUBLIC'S TOP MEASURES OF HEALTH CARE QUALITY**

*Recommendations from Family and Friends Play Most Important Role in Choosing  
Physician, Hospital or Health Plan*

*Few People Trust Employers or go to the Internet to Find Information on Providers*

(WASHINGTON, DC) December 11, 2000—A new survey of Americans by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Agency for Health Care Research and Quality (AHRQ) shows that the recent attention to medical errors may have entered the public's consciousness since it is now among the public's leading measures of health care quality. The results of the national survey of over 2,000 adults indicates that people are more concerned about mistakes happening when they are in the hands of the health care system than when they are flying on an airplane. Large majorities say that information about medical errors (71%) and malpractice suits (70%) would be the biggest help to them in determining the quality of providers.

The survey also found that the public is more likely to rely on recommendations of friends, family and health professionals they know than on standardized quality indicators. However, the gap between relying on family, friends, and personal physicians versus data has begun to narrow since 1996 when the survey was first conducted. The survey also shows that, although most Americans get their health coverage through the work place, six in ten do not believe employers are a trusted source of information on quality of providers, and few have consulted the internet for such information.

"Media attention to the Institute of Medicine story has propelled the problem of medical errors to the forefront in just a short period of time. It's an amazing example of agenda setting," said Drew Altman, Ph.D., president of the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Americans are more likely now than in 1996 to say there are big differences in the quality of local health plans, hospitals, and specialists. For example, more than half of Americans (55%) say there are big differences in the quality of care among local health plans, an increase from 47% in 1996.

Provider experience is also important to Americans in informing them about the quality of a doctor or hospital: 66% say how much experience a hospital has in performing a particular test or procedure, and 65% say the number of times a doctor has conducted a specific medical procedure are important measures of quality. Patient experiences in getting care are also important to consumers. Whether the plan has

programs to help people with chronic illnesses (67%), how easy it is for plan members to see specialists (66%), how quickly patients can see a doctor when they need an appointment (64%), and the percentage of plan members who get preventive care for conditions like high blood pressure (63%), were frequently cited as indicators of quality of a health plan.

“This study clearly shows that people are interested in information on the quality of the health care services they receive, but they don’t actively seek out that information,” said John M. Eisenberg, director of the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. “All of us involved in producing quality information have both an opportunity and a responsibility to make this information more readily available, as well as to ensure that the information is reliable, valid, and useful in helping people make more informed health care decisions. This is a special opportunity to put research to work to improve health care quality.”

### **Familiarity Weighs Heavily in Selecting Providers**

Around 6 in 10 Americans say they would rely “a lot” on friends and family members or their regular doctors to make choices. Less than half say they would rely on indicators such as patient surveys, consumer groups, and newspapers and magazines. The majority say that if they wanted to find information comparing the quality of different providers, they would be very likely to ask for recommendations from friends, family members or co-workers (70%), or from a doctor, nurse, or other health professional they know (65%).

Personal recommendations and familiarity are so important that they often outweigh more formal indications of quality. More people say that they would choose a surgeon they had seen before but who was not well rated (50%) than a surgeon they had not seen before who was rated higher (38%). Likewise, people are more likely to choose a hospital that is familiar (62%) over one that is rated higher (32%).

### **Availability and Usefulness of Quality Information**

Only about one in ten Americans have used information that compares quality among health plans, hospitals or doctors to help them make their health care decisions. This is not surprising given that few people have seen any information of this kind. About one-quarter have seen comparative information about health plans, only 15% about hospitals, and one in ten about doctors.

Among those who have seen information comparing the quality of providers, many indicated that they did not need to make a decision at the time they saw the information on quality, or that the information was not relevant to their personal health concern.

### **Role of the Internet**

Despite the increased role of the Internet in information gathering of all kinds, the survey shows that few people are currently going online to find information about the quality of providers, and few trust health websites to provide accurate information. Currently, just 7% of the public has seen information about quality online, which is equivalent to 27% of those who had actually seen any comparative quality information at all. However, when asked where they would be likely to turn in the future for such information, 28% say they would go online. While more than seven in ten say they trust doctors and pharmacists to provide accurate information about prescription drugs, only 9% say they have “a lot” and 31% say “some” trust in health websites for such information.

### **Role of Government**

Seventy-three percent say that the government should require health care providers to report all serious medical errors and to make sure this information is publicly available, versus 21% who say that this type of reporting should be voluntary in order to ensure the privacy of patients and medical staff. Furthermore, more than six in ten believe there is a role for government in promoting, monitoring and providing information about the quality of doctors, hospitals and health plans: 28% say that the government should

just work with providers to improve quality, 21% say that the government should go further and penalize providers that fail to meet standards, and 12% think that the government should just make sure information is available.

Methodology:

The results of the Kaiser Family Foundation/Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality *National Survey on Americans as Health Care Consumers: An Update on the Role of Quality Information* are based on a telephone survey conducted between July 31 and October 9, 2000, among a randomly selected nationally representative sample of 2,014 adults 18 years or older. Representatives from both organizations worked together to develop the survey questionnaire and to analyze the results. Fieldwork was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the Kaiser Family Foundation. The margin of sampling error is +/-2 percentage points. For results based on subsets of respondents the margin of error is higher. Note that in addition to sampling error there are other possible sources of measurement error.

Trends from 1996 are from the Kaiser Family Foundation/Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality *Americans as Health Care Consumers: The Role of Quality Information* national survey conducted from July 26-September 5, 1996 with 2,006 adults. Fieldwork for this survey was also conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates. The margin of error for that survey is +/-3 percentage points.

The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, based in Menlo Park, California, is a nonprofit, independent national health care philanthropy and is not associated with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries.

The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality is the lead Federal agency charged with supporting research designed to improve the quality of health care, reduce its cost, address patient safety and medical errors, and broaden access to essential services.