What Americans Say About the Nation’s Medical Schools and Teaching Hospitals

Key Findings from the AAMC’s 2010 Public Opinion Research

Part Three: Views about Health Care Reform and National Health Care Priorities

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Introduction

The AAMC (Association of American Medical Colleges) has worked with Public Opinion Strategies (POS), a leading Washington, D.C., area opinion research firm, since 1996 to gauge public attitudes toward medical schools and teaching hospitals.

Beginning in May 2010, the AAMC commissioned POS to conduct an extensive round of qualitative and quantitative public opinion research with voters, opinion leaders, Washington, D.C., opinion elites, and policy leaders. The objectives of this research were to:

1) Assess current perceptions of medical schools and teaching hospitals, and

2) Develop and test messages to build support for the missions of medical schools and teaching hospitals and to help position them effectively in the wake of the passage of health care reform legislation.

The goal of this portion of the public opinion research project was to gauge opinion about medical schools and teaching hospitals in the post-health care reform environment. Toward that end, we explored voter opinion about the health care reform law, and asked respondents to identify their top national health care priorities, how well they thought medical schools and teaching hospitals were performing on these priorities, and perceptions about the impact of the law on health care access, cost, quality, and the physician supply.

Public Opinion About the Health Care Reform Law and Its Impact

In the national and Washington, D.C., surveys, opinions about the health care reform law were closely divided. When asked if they had a generally favorable or unfavorable opinion of the law, voters nationally were split between 44 percent who had a favorable opinion and 47 percent who had an unfavorable view. Opinion elites in Washington, D.C., had more favorable impressions (59 percent favorable to 37 percent unfavorable) of the measure.

Closer examination of the data shows that public perceptions of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) are being driven by partisan views. Voters identifying themselves as Democrats expressed a much higher favorable rating (72 percent) than Independents (37 percent) and Republicans (14 percent). Opinions of the Washington, D.C., opinion elites were similarly divided.
A national Internet survey of opinion elites explored the perceptions about the impact of health care reform and the effects it could have on the availability, quality, and cost of care, as well as the number of doctors. A majority of voters believe that the quality of health care will get worse (41 percent), the cost of health care will increase (58 percent), and the number of doctors will decrease (41 percent). Responses were mixed on how the law could impact the availability of health care in the United States.

**Perceptions of The New Health Care Reform Law - VOTERS**

In measuring the impact of the new health care reform law on specific attributes, a plurality to a majority of voters believe:

- The quality of health care will get worse (41%)
- The cost of health care will increase (58%)
- The number of doctors will decrease (41%)

There is less clarity on how the new law will impact the availability of health care services in the United States.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Increase</th>
<th>Decrease</th>
<th>Stay the Same</th>
<th>Don't Know</th>
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<td>31%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>22%</td>
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In focus groups of voters, opinion leaders, and opinion elites in Philadelphia, Sacramento, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C., most participants believed the new health care reform law would have some kind of impact on hospitals in general. Specifically, many thought there would be a larger pool of patients needing care and that facilities might become overloaded as more people see doctors. More in-depth exploration about how the new health care reform law might impact teaching hospitals and medical schools prompted respondents to mention the shortage of primary care physicians and the need to train more doctors and other health care professionals. Respondents in Washington, D.C., wanted evidence that medical schools and teaching hospitals were preparing for a possible shortage of doctors by creating and building more medical schools, graduating more doctors in primary care, and expanding the pool of applicants to medical school.

**National Health Care Reform Priorities**

In the national telephone survey of 800 voters, respondents ranked on a scale of one to 10 the personal importance of 20 different national health care priorities that could be addressed by the president and Congress.

The top priorities they identified included reducing medical errors (61 percent), making sure people can choose the doctor or hospital of their choice (58 percent), making sure Americans have access to preventive care (58 percent), reducing health care costs (57 percent), and improving health (56 percent).

Also on the list of voter priorities were improving health care quality (54 percent), conducting research to find new cures and treatments (53 percent), helping control patients’ out-of-pocket costs (51 percent), and increasing access to health care (51 percent).

### President/Congress Priorities (%10)

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<th>Priorities - Voters</th>
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<tr>
<td>Reducing medical errors.</td>
<td>61%</td>
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<td>Making sure people can select the doctor or hospital of their choice.</td>
<td>58%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making sure all Americans have access to preventive care services, such as immunizations, cancer screening, and tests for diabetes and high cholesterol.</td>
<td>58%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reducing health care costs.</td>
<td>57%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improving health.</td>
<td>56%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improving the quality of health care.</td>
<td>54%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conducting research to find new cures and treatments.</td>
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<td>Helping control out-of-pocket cost that patients pay for health care.</td>
<td>51%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increasing access to health care.</td>
<td>51%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educating and training more primary care doctors.</td>
<td>48%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educating and training more nurses.</td>
<td>48%</td>
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Least important in respondents’ minds was developing new models of care where physicians and health care professionals work in teams on a patient’s behalf (37 percent), educating and training more specialty doctors (37 percent), implementing medical malpractice reform (32 percent), and putting into practice electronic medical records (28 percent).

Medical School and Teaching Hospital Performance on Health Care Priorities

Respondents were then asked how medical schools and teaching hospitals were performing on these priorities. Voters and Washington, D.C., opinion elites gave institutions the best grades for:

- Conducting research to find new cures/treatments
- Educating and training the next generation of doctors
- Developing and providing access to new medical technologies
- Improving health.

Of these priorities, only “improving health” is both a top priority and an area in which medical schools and teaching hospitals are seen as “performing well.” It also is important to note that the issue identified by voters and D.C. opinion elites as the top national health care priority – reducing medical errors – is not an issue on which they believe medical schools and teaching hospitals are performing well. Other high priorities on which respondents said medical schools and teaching hospitals are not performing well are helping control out-of-pocket costs that patients pay for health care and reducing health care costs.
The following chart compares voters’ perceptions of medical school and teaching hospital performance on national health care reform priorities.

Attitudes and Perceptions of Policy Leaders

A series of one-on-one interviews with 12 health care policy leaders in Washington, DC, explored their expectations of medical schools and teaching hospitals during this period of change in the nation’s health care system. Policy leaders who were interviewed were clear that they want medical schools and teaching hospitals to be the leaders at the forefront of health care reform, accepting of the coming changes to the system, and being the health care players who take the helm and institutionalize these changes first. Unlike voters, policy leaders want medical schools and teaching hospitals to develop new, innovative models of care and to make sure they are focused on practicing health care in the most cost-effective ways. Policy leaders also want institutions to develop quality measurement systems and ways to assess the needs of a population and the ability of an institution to take care of them. In addition, policy leaders want institutions to demonstrate the new delivery system reforms being tried and to show evidence they have worked.
Summary Observations

- In thinking about the impact of health care reform in general on hospitals, respondents believe a larger pool of patients will need care and that facilities might become overloaded as more people see doctors.

- Respondents mentioned the shortage today of primary care physicians and the need to train more doctors and other health care professionals to fill this need, especially with the expected increases in patients seeking care as a result of the new health care reform law.

- The top health care priorities voters want the president and Congress to address are: reducing medical errors, making sure people can choose their own doctors or hospitals, making sure Americans have access to preventive care, reducing health care costs, and improving health.

- Health care priorities identified by voters as “least important” were developing new models of care, educating and training more specialty doctors, implementing medical malpractice reform, and putting into practice electronic medical records. However, developing new models of care is a high priority for policy leaders.

- Although reducing medical errors, reducing health care costs, increasing access to health care, and helping control patients’ out-of-pocket costs were high priorities for voters, respondents do not see those as priorities where medical schools and teaching hospitals are performing well.

- Health care policy leaders want medical schools and teaching hospitals to be at the forefront of health care reform.
Appendix

Public Opinion Strategies

Public Opinion Strategies (POS) is a national political and public affairs survey research firm. Bill McInturff, POS partner and cofounder, and POS partner Elizabeth Harrington managed this project.

One of the nation’s leading political pollsters, Mr. McInturff, conducts The NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll with Peter D. Hart, and was the lead pollster for John McCain in 2008. POS currently represents 20 U.S. senators, five governors, and over 70 members of Congress.

Apart from his political work, Mr. McInturff’s issue expertise is health care, and he has conducted research on issues ranging from hospital funding to covering the uninsured for hospital associations and coalitions, not-for-profit foundations, and health insurance companies. He and Ms. Harrington have worked on many projects for the AAMC since 1996, including the research that laid the foundation for the Research Means Hope campaign.

Research Project Methodology

A total of 2,225 respondents participated in this research project. The research was conducted from May through October 2010 and consisted of the following components:

- Twelve one-on-one, in-depth telephone interviews among high-level health care policy leaders from academia, congressional offices, foundations, government agencies, the media, the research community, and think tanks, during June, August, and September.
- Six national focus groups: three opinion leader groups and three opinion elite groups in St. Louis (14 participants), Sacramento (19 participants), and Philadelphia (16 participants), June–July.
- Two Washington, D.C., focus groups: one policy leader group and one opinion elite group (20 participants), July.
- National telephone survey of 800 registered voters, September.
- Two Internet surveys: a national Internet survey of 830 registered voters and a D.C. Internet survey of 200 opinion elites, September and October.