The Origins of and Economic Momentum Behind "Pay for Performance" Reimbursement

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Abstract

“Pay for performance,” a reimbursement method under which some physicians and hospitals are paid more than others for the same services because they have been deemed to deliver better quality care and their patients appear to have better outcomes, is enormously controversial. Disputes invariably arise over how “quality” should (or even can) be measured. Nevertheless, differentiating between medical providers, financially, lies at the heart of this new reimbursement innovation developed by insurance companies and employers. Its two main objectives are: (1) to increase the overall quality of health care that patients receive, and (2) to encourage behavioral change on the part of physicians and hospitals that leads to increased efficiency. This article attempts to explain where the momentum for “pay for performance” reimbursement has come from, why its advocates consider it an improvement upon existing payment systems, and how it can both positively and negatively affect medical providers.

The majority of health care spending in the U.S., argues health economist David Cutler, is good. Rather than pay less, he maintains that we as a nation should pay for more medical care, albeit wisely.1 Unfortunately, getting additional value from increased medical spending is difficult under the current models of reimbursement. The three worst payment mechanisms for rewarding quality and performance, jokes health economist Jamie Robinson, are: (a) fee-for-service, (b) capitation, and (c) salary.2 What all three of these models have in common is that, financially, they generally treat most physicians and hospitals the same regardless of their patients’ outcomes.3 “Pay for performance,” then, is principally an effort by a growing number of employers and insurers to find new ways to pay medical providers that increases the value and quality of the health care that they purchase, as well as the efficiency with which it is provided.4 Two landmark reports by the Institute of Medicine [IOM]—To Err is Human (2000) and Crossing the Quality Chasm (2001)—put health care quality and patient safety issues squarely on the public policy agenda.5 The 2000 report estimated that as many as 98,000 patients die annually in U.S. hospitals due to preventable medical errors. The statistic was made more visceral when the report’s authors noted that this was equivalent to a 300-passenger airplane crashing almost daily in the U.S.6

The IOM reports raised the profile of an initiative closely related to “pay for performance” reimbursement, which goes far beyond just improving hospital safety. It is critical for medical providers to understand what this initiative is and how accumulating evidence over the last three decades have shaped its development. The initiative is to reduce unwarranted geographic variation in both the volume and variety of medical care provided, while at the same time increasing the kinds of care that clearly work and improve patients’ health.7

Economic & Epidemiological Origins

Key to understanding why efforts to reduce unwarranted medical variation and “pay for performance” reimburse-
In short, the substantial differences in health care spending that exist across the country are disproportionately related to the number of specialists, hospital beds and technology available.
very best patient outcomes. But mounting evidence has begun to indicate otherwise. What one tends to find instead is a bell curve: a number of medical providers with shockingly poor outcomes for their patients, a roughly equal number on the other side of the curve with extraordinarily good results, and a large “average” middle.

The growing ability to measure patients’ outcomes, and the subsequent discovery that they vary more than previously assumed, has contributed to the popularity of “pay for performance” reimbursement because it would allow health plans and employers to do three things simultaneously: (a) pay more to medical providers with the best patient outcomes, (b) encourage the majority of medical providers with average outcomes to find ways of improving, and (c) pay less to medical providers with the worst patient outcomes—or perhaps not pay them at all. If publishing K-12 educational test scores and “on-time arrival” statistics is considered a good idea for encouraging local schools and airlines to improve their performance, the argument goes, how bad of an idea could it be for medical providers?

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Policy and Legal Implications

“Pay for performance” could be problematic for a couple of reasons, observers contend, particularly for small physician practices and hospitals. First, it could encourage gaming on the part of hospitals and physicians, whereby they consciously or unconsciously favor taking healthier, more educated and affluent patients with the highest probability of successful outcomes. Under this “rich get richer, while the poor get poorer” scenario, “pay for performance” might unfairly penalize physicians who care for sicker and less affluent patients.

Donald Berwick, founder of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement and one of the leading voices for raising standards of medical quality, supports performance-based models for hospitals and health systems, but he is skeptical of their value at the individual physician-level. Second, many older patients have multiple chronic conditions with different clinical practice guidelines [CPGs], which complicates assigning them to any one “pay for performance” quality or outcome-based measure.

Fortunately for hospitals, physicians, and practice managers, existing “pay for performance” models tend to only pay more for the best providers: all those either above a specific threshold or percentile ranking in terms of their patients’ care and outcomes. They currently do not single out any specific minority of providers for lower payment. Furthermore, physicians and hospitals that already meet a standard (e.g., an 80 percent childhood immunization rate or a 100 percent administration of aspirin to patients who present with myocardial infarction), usually need only maintain their status quo to receive performance-related bonus payments. Finally, the percent of a physician’s overall revenue that is at stake is rarely more than 10 percent, which can complicate matters because any stake less than 10 percent is seldom worth medical providers’ time and effort. Again, though, current “pay for performance” models are not intended to punish physicians, but rather to change existing payment incentives and encourage redesigned systems and large investments in IT (e.g., electronic medical records). So for physicians and hospitals already looking for extra capital to make these investments, “pay for performance” may present a one-time opportunity to have someone else finance it.

The legal underpinnings of existing “pay for performance” programs are similar to those of the predominant financial contracts that determine risks and rewards between medical providers and medical purchasers (employers and health plans). The most common programs provide a pure bonus to those providers that meet performance targets. Some “pay for performance” programs, however, are more aggressive and withhold—thereby putting at risk—a proportion of contracted payments to medical providers unless they meet performance targets. Key to the design and implementation of any “pay for performance” program is health plans’ contractual bargaining with medical providers over performance or quality criteria and bonus structures. The U.S. Department of Justice and the Federal Trade Commission regulate the extent to which physicians and hospitals can form networks.
to collectively bargain with health plans without violating
U.S. antitrust laws. Yet these regulations, which allow
providers to form networks as long as they represent no
more than approximately a quarter of all the providers in
their relevant geographic market, only provide protection
from federal investigation. Private parties and state regula-
tors are free to initiate their own antitrust claims.

The prevalence of “pay for performance” reimbursement is
growing, largely as a result of employers’ intense efforts to
limit their health care cost inflation. Most of the areas that
it targets are primary care and, thus, are likely to improve
patient outcomes, although early experience with “pay for
performance” has been less than impressive in terms of dra-
matically improving health care quality. The majority of
measures that “pay for performance” models use to deter-
mine bonus payments target the underuse of care. As a
result, when adopted, they usually increase health spend-
ing. “Pay for performance” also appears to be well-suited
for treating patients with chronic conditions, such as dia-
tes, heart disease, and hypertension. As a dominant reim-
bursement model, though, it is still years away.

Yet if Medicare eventually shifts the bulk of its reimburse-
ment to various forms of “pay for performance,” as many of
its current leaders want to do, the medical landscape would
change rapidly. Medicare is the “800-pound gorilla” of
American medicine. When it moves, virtually all other
stakeholders in the U.S. health care system are forced to
adjust their behavior to varying degrees. Several senior
Medicare officials are particularly enthusiastic about “pay
for performance,” because upwards of 80 percent of the pro-
gram’s beneficiaries have at least 1 chronic condition, and
30 percent have 4 or more. The latter group drives almost 80
percent of Medicare’s total spending. Any new reimburse-
ment system that can improve the health of these patients
with multiple chronic conditions creates the potential for
significant cost savings. Medicare is currently experiment-
ing with a number of hospitals that have voluntarily agreed
to participate in a program that rewards top performing hos-
pitals by increasing their payment for Medicare patients.

Ultimately, the medical community should prepare to play a
very proactive role in determining precisely how “performance’
and “quality” will be measured and, thus, how this new form of reimbursement can best improve both patient
safety and health care delivery (not health plans’ financial
well-being). It is an old cliche, but when it comes to “pay for
performance” reimbursement, the “devil will most certainly
be in the details.”

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