

VIEWPOINT

Vital Directions for Health and Health Care

An Initiative of the National Academy of Medicine

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A Critical Inflection Point

This is a time of unparalleled dynamism for policy and practice in the nation's health, health care, and biomedical science communities. The past decade has seen tremendous developments in medical science and care delivery with the advent of big data, biomedical innovations, new forms of health care financing, and an emphasis on greater accountability. Precision medicine, novel drugs and devices, and new diagnostic capabilities are expanding treatment options. Digital technologies such as m-Health allow patients to take a more active role in their health and health care decisions. Locally and regionally, community innovators are designing coordinated care delivery models that hold significant promise for increasing efficiency and value. Furthermore, a growing focus on population health, wellness, and prevention is driving improvements in health and quality of life in the United States.

Alongside such meaningful progress, US health care faces critical challenges. The health system is increasingly strained by growing complexity, demand, and unsustainable costs. Health care spending accounts for 17.5% of the US gross domestic product in the most recent report¹—a rate substantially greater than any of its peer countries—yet 1 in 10 US residents report their health as poor or only fair,² and overall life expectancy and care quality continue to lag behind that of other high-income nations.³ Care decisions frequently do not align with patient goals or evidence of effectiveness, driving unnecessary spending and diminishing the value of care. Furthermore, some US residents continue to experience untenable disparities in health status and access to care with clear discrepancies across race, ethnicity, sex, age, socioeconomic status, and geography.

US health care has reached a critical inflection point, facing not only complex challenges but also immense opportunity and promise. Leveraging the existing opportunities and resources effectively could yield substantial results in achieving a healthier, more efficient, and equitable nation. The current climate in health care is ripe for meaningful change.

Vital Directions for Health and Health Care

Decision makers must prioritize and address these challenges and opportunities as they chart the next steps in health policy, and do so while navigating the ideological polarization surrounding health issues today. The National Academy of Medicine's (NAM's) *Vital Directions for Health and Health Care* initiative is mobilizing expert opinions from more than 100 trusted health and health care leaders to facilitate this important process in the context of the upcoming change in administration. *Vital Directions* aims to ensure that nonpartisan, evidence-based analysis of health policy opportunities and

priorities is available to policy makers as well as other key decision makers, opinion leaders, and the public. The initiative will identify existing gaps and areas of opportunity and explore national policies that are immediately actionable and hold promise for improving care quality, increasing access, lowering costs, and accelerating progress across health science and policy.

Recognizing that the overall health of the nation is imperative to its prosperity and success, the NAM seeks to identify avenues for bipartisan collaboration to advance 3 overarching goals: better health and well-being, high-value health care, and strong science and technology.

Better Health and Well-being

Key barriers and challenges exist to achieving uniformly good health and well-being across the country. Many individuals in the United States experience worse health than those in other countries. In a 2014 report, the United States ranked last among 11 highly industrialized nations in quality, efficiency, and equity of care.⁴ Rates of avoidable chronic conditions continue to increase, contributing to the country's poor health and increasing health care costs. Behavioral issues and other preventable factors account for approximately half of early deaths in the nation,⁵ yet effective prevention strategies are poorly applied. Poor health is also inextricably linked to experiences in early life and persisting social disadvantages associated with education, poverty, housing, the built environment, and inequity based on race, ethnicity, and sex. Instead of vigorously addressing these crucially important community and population health issues, the US health expenditure profiles reflect a disproportionate orientation toward disease and injury treatment. An increasing body of evidence indicates that shifting emphases toward prevention-oriented and behavioral and social services could offer promising returns in better health and well-being.

High-Value Health Care

With the relatively high prevalence of care inefficiencies, excessive prices, and unnecessary administrative expenses driving such high costs of health care in the United States,⁶ the resources should be ample to deliver higher-quality care, at improved value, and with better outcomes. Realizing high-value health care is a multifaceted challenge that requires action to reduce waste and improve efficiency; implement innovative financing, delivery, and payment models that reward quality over quantity of services; improve care coordination and integration; adopt and integrate novel, patient-centric diagnostics and treatments; ensure that system performance is transparently measured and reported; train and employ a workforce with diverse capabilities and skill sets; and empower the patient population as partners and leaders in the work.

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Strong Science and Technology

US health and health care needs are increasingly complex. One in 4 US residents lives with multiple chronic conditions⁷ and, in any given year, 1 in 5 adults experiences a mental disorder.⁸ Along with improvements in care delivery, effective translation of advances in science and technology is critically important to solving these health challenges. Despite impressive advances in biomedical science, health technology, and data utilization, the United States faces challenges that threaten to stymie its innovative edge. US public and private investment in biomedical research declined from 57% to 44% between 2004 and 2011,⁹ weakening the nation's long-standing role as a global leader in medical research and innovation. Key analytic, interoperability, infrastructural, and regulatory constraints impede widespread aggregation, reporting, and sharing of patient data longitudinally. Development of new drugs is a costly, cumbersome, and time-consuming process. Furthermore, fragmented education and training pathways present critical challenges to attracting and maintaining a strong scientific workforce.

By assembling evidence-based perspectives in each of these 3 arenas, *Vital Directions* aims to identify and advance a streamlined set of strategic directions for the nation that are actionable and capable of yielding change in the near term. The initiative is guided by an 18-member bipartisan steering committee (eAppendix in the Supplement) under whose leadership it is producing a series of expert papers (Box) published as NAM Perspectives and summarized as *JAMA* Viewpoints, a public symposium framed as a "national conversation" to gather additional input, and culminating in a synthesis report to accompany the set of perspectives.

Adviser to the Nation: The National Academy of Medicine

A core mission of the NAM is to provide evidence-based advice to the government—and the nation—to accelerate progress in health and health care. Since its initial establishment in 1970 as the Institute of Medicine, the NAM has developed and maintained a reputation for authoritative guidance removed from political ideology, and its work has had a significant effect on science, policy, and health in the United States and worldwide.

As the November elections draw near with transitions on so many dimensions, the nation faces a critical juncture in the future of its health system. Ideological polarization surrounding health and health care risks impeding critical progress. It is imperative that policy makers, as well as the US public, are informed by objective, nonpartisan, expert assessment of national health needs, policy priorities,

Box. Perspectives Topics: Priorities and Strategies to Accelerate Progress Related to the Initiative Goals**Better Health and Well-being**

Systems strategies for better health throughout the life course
Addressing health disparities and social determinants of health
Preparing for better health and health care for an aging population
Improving physical activity, nutrition, and other prevention programs
Improving access to effective care for people who have mental health and substance use disorders
Advancing the health of communities and populations

High-Value Health Care

Benefit design to promote effective, efficient, and affordable care
Payment reform for better value and medical innovation
Competencies and tools to shift payments from volume to value
Tailoring complex care management, coordination, and integration
Realizing the full potential of precision medicine in health and health care
Fostering transparency in outcomes, quality, safety, and costs
Democratization of health care
Workforce for 21st-century health and health care

Strong Science and Technology

Information technology interoperability and use for better care and evidence
Data acquisition, curation, and use for a continuously learning health system
Innovation in development, regulatory review, and use of clinical advances
Targeted research: case example directed to brain disorders
Training the workforce for 21st-century science

and potential evidence-based solutions. As an independent, science-driven organization, the NAM is uniquely positioned to respond to this need. Through the *Vital Directions* initiative, the NAM is assembling authoritative advice from foremost experts and forward-thinking innovators across the country to address the health care needs of the nation. At this crucial turning point in the nation's history, the NAM is committed to doing all it can to promote better care and equitable health for every person in the United States.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

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