

Health Headlines

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GAO Issues Report on HHS's Quality Measure Development

On January 13, 2012, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued a report that examined HHS contractor National Quality Forum's (NQF) progress on quality measurement projects and HHS's use of NQF activities in implementing quality measurement initiatives introduced by the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA).

NQF's work under a four-year contract includes, for example, endorsing healthcare quality measures, promoting the development and use of electronic health records (EHR), selecting measures for use in payment programs and value-based purchasing programs, and providing input on HHS's National Strategy for Quality Improvement in Healthcare. The GAO report addressed NQF's performance from January 2010 to August 2011.

GAO found that while NQF has completed or made progress on 60 of 63 projects, it missed deadlines on over half of the projects and exceeded cost estimates for several activities. GAO further noted that HHS did not conduct annual performance evaluations of NQF that would have assessed timeliness and cost control issues.

HHS used or planned to use approximately half of NQF's quality measures (164 of 344). For instance, HHS used 44 of the 164 measures in CMS's Medicare and Medicaid EHR Incentive Program (42 C.F.R. § 495). This initiative involved converting quality measures to an electronic format compatible with EHRs. However, some of the 44 measures had coding and other errors, and have not yet been tested for feasibility of implementation in an electronic format. Thus, some of the measures may not accurately measure performance when implemented in an electronic format.

GAO concluded that HHS does not maintain a comprehensive plan for determining how it will use the remainder of NQF's work to carry out PPACA quality initiatives. According to GAO, "Without such a plan, HHS may be limited in its efforts to prioritize which specific measures it needs to develop and have endorsed by NQF for its health care quality programs and initiatives established by PPACA. As a result, HHS may be unable to ensure that the agency receives the quality measures needed to meet PPACA requirements and specified time frames related to quality measurement."

GAO recommends that HHS:

- use monitoring tools required under the NQF contract to evaluate NQF's performance;
- conduct testing of the measures used in the EHR Incentive Program in a timely manner to ensure they accurately measure performance; and
- develop a comprehensive plan that identifies HHS quality measurement needs and PPACA requirements and provides a strategy for using NQF to help meet these needs.

The GAO report is available by clicking [here](#).

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