

Source: Smiley Pete Publishing

## **Healthcare reform must first define quality care**

by Gilbert H. Friedell, M.D.

**August 06, 2009**

Lexington, KY - The present health system in this country – and in Kentucky – costs too much and delivers too little for most people. And too many people are left out altogether. That’s an agreed-upon starting point in the state and national discussion of the subject. From that point on, however, the discussion and disagreement has focused on how to meet the cost of health care, with relatively little attention to what we should buy. The primary concern has been the price of the package and how to pay for it, not its contents.

Regardless of how health services are paid for, the larger problem is the fragmented and dysfunctional way in which services are provided, leading to “overuse, under use, and misuse of services” according to the Institute of Medicine. This causes the higher cost and lower effectiveness that characterize our citizens’ health care compared to the experience in other developed countries. We do not have, and badly need, a well-functioning health system with an effective oversight mechanism. Consequently the health needs of families and communities in Kentucky and elsewhere in the country are not being met.

Kentuckians need and deserve a system that provides coordinated, comprehensive, high-quality care (including preventive care services), that is not interrupted as we move from one job to another, or from one stage in life to another. Over time our citizens have indicated strongly that they want this system to be based on clearly stated values. A set of such values emerged in 1992 from community forums in each of our 15 Area Development Districts at a time when healthcare reform was being considered both in Frankfort and Washington. Roughly 5,000 people gathered “to voice their opinions, concerns and personal experience” about health care. Two thousand pages of transcript were collected, and in 1994, an independent expert reviewed the transcript and identified the values important to the participants.

In subsequent years, other individuals and organizations put forward comparable sets of values. In 2005 a statewide, independent, non-partisan, citizens’ committee (later designated as the Friedell Committee for Health System Transformation) was formed to draft an inclusive set of values-based principles as the essential characteristics to be sought in a high-performance health system for Kentucky.

The Committee concluded the system should rest on these principles:

- Health systems are accountable to the public.
- Health systems are responsible for promoting the health of individuals and populations.
- Health professionals are responsible for providing safe and effective care.
- Each individual has fair and equal access to care.
- Care for each individual is of high quality.
- Care for each individual is affordable.
- Care is efficient and of high value for recipients and families.
- Patients and families are treated with respect.

- Patient rights are clearly expressed and honored.
- Individuals and communities share responsibility for both health and the cost of care.

These principles reflect the concerns of a broad array of health professionals and organizations as well as of the general public. The Committee recommends their use as: 1) benchmarks in evaluating the present health system, 2) foundational elements in the development of a transformed system, and 3) criteria in the oversight over time of whatever system(s) are put in place at the state or national level.

It is hoped that many other individuals and groups will use these principles in similar ways to assess specific health and healthcare activities, and will use the principles to develop systemic solutions to these problems. We hope that by doing so communities will recognize that through their own efforts they can improve both the health status and the healthcare services in their communities. In turn, we hope the results of these community efforts will help local and state policymakers recognize ways to facilitate this improvement.

With the development of measures and metrics, these principles can help evaluate the overall healthcare system and can also be used by individuals to evaluate the care they themselves receive. Health professionals can, and should, evaluate the care they provide, using a defined set of process and outcome indicators. But only the care recipient can speak knowledgeably about any obstacles to obtaining health care, its timeliness, its comprehensiveness, the ease of complying with the management plan, the relief of symptoms or satisfactory resolution of the presenting complaint. The care recipient is the one to assess respect for patients, ease of entry into and navigation of the system, system efficiency and overall cost-benefit ratio from the patient's standpoint.

A favorable view by individuals of their healthcare environment is particularly important in encouraging them to accept and act on the advice offered by physicians and other providers, and to make optimal use of worksite health maintenance and wellness programs. Feedback based on assessments from recipients of healthcare services and from participants in wellness programs would be particularly important in assuring that these services and programs are responsive to the needs and concerns of the participants.

From the business standpoint, it would be hoped that following these measures would result in a healthier workforce, demonstrable employee satisfaction with the care made available through employer-provided health insurance, and more knowledge for employers of the performance of providers in the care of their employees as when viewed through the prism of the principles.

The Committee would appreciate feedback from interested individuals about the role of the principles in considering health system reform in general. We would also like to hear from business groups about the possible usefulness to them of further development of measures and metrics for each principle as aids in their review of their business health insurance programs.

Gilbert H. Friedell, M.D. is president of Friedell Committee for Health System Transformation and director emeritus of the Markey Cancer Center, University of Kentucky.