

Update on Screening for Colorectal Cancer

Mona Sarfaty, MD
Research Assistant Professor
Department of Health Policy
Jefferson Medical College

In July 2006, the National Commission on Prevention Priorities reported that it had ranked colorectal cancer (CRC) screening as one of the top four prevention priorities¹⁻³, based on the burden of clinical disease that could be prevented and cost-effectiveness. The report of the Commission highlighted the importance of prevention, and challenged those interested to head efforts to improve quality in the delivery of preventive services.

In March 2007, legislation was introduced in Congress that would establish a national CRC screening program. It would be supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) through grants to states and other entities that could reach the target populations. If established, this new federal effort would increase access to screening for the low-income uninsured and under-insured. Five demonstration programs funded by the CDC and three statewide programs that have provided free screening to low income uninsured individuals are providing trial runs for this program.

Recognition of the importance of CRC screening has inspired initiation of several successful efforts to improve screening rates over the last decade. In 2002, only seven states had screening rates $\geq 60\%$; by 2004, only two years later, 15 states were at that level, seven had surpassed 65%.⁴ During the same time period, 11 states experienced increases in endoscopy screening rates of 7% or greater; two had increases of 12%.^{5,6} Nationwide, overall screening rates increased by 3%.⁴ Medicare screening rates also demonstrated significant increases as measured in 2000 and 2003.⁷ And, between 2003 and 2005, rates in Medicare managed care plan increased from 49.5% to 53.9%; rates in commercial managed care plans increased from 47.4% to 52.3%.⁸

Significant efforts have been mounted by private and public groups to improve screening rates. The National Colorectal Cancer Roundtable supports progress of these groups with its strategic planning and networking activities. The Roundtable was founded as a collaborative endeavor between the CDC and the American Cancer Society (ACS) in 1997.

Influential groups like the Cancer Research and Prevention Foundation (www.preventcancer.org), the Entertainment Industry Foundation (www.eif.org), well known cancer centers, physician associations, and voluntary health organizations have played major roles. The Roundtable and its nearly 50 member organizations focus on policy, professional education, and public awareness. Activities in each area contribute to the improving screening rates.

The Roundtable members with a policy focus have worked on policies that promote screening, including coverage by third-party payers and employer purchasing of health benefits that include CRC screening. They worked with National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) to include a measure on CRC screening in the Health Employer Data and Information Set (HEDIS). As of 2006, managed care plans now report CRC screening rates.

The Roundtable members focusing on professional education and practice sought to stimulate interventions among providers that increase screening. They urged associations of health professionals to include continuing education on CRC in accreditation, certification, and recertification procedures. The work group embraced the well-documented conclusion that provider recommendation is pivotal in persuading individuals to undergo screening.⁹ The Roundtable published a toolbox and guide to assist primary care physicians to improve screening rates.

The third group of Roundtable members focus on public awareness. They promote CRC screening in general rather than by a particular test. They recommended public education campaigns coupled with carefully designed interventions to target subgroups at greater risk. They endorsed the delivery of messages by role models, celebrities, and television personalities who could get public attention and influence behavior. In 2002, they achieved a designation of Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month for the month of March and developed the campaign slogan, “preventable, treatable, beatable.” Polyp Man™ was created and appeared in televised public service announcements. In 2006, the Warner Brothers’ Foghorn Leghorn cartoon character spoke to the television audience (“I say, I say, don’t be a chicken, get screened”). Many groups have taken a leadership role in these and other public awareness initiatives, including the Cancer Research and Prevention Foundation, the Colorectal Cancer

Alliance, the STOP Colorectal Cancer Foundation, Hadassah, the EIF, the Jay Monahan Center, and the Eric Davis Foundation.

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