

[The comment below was posted on journalreview.org on December 5, 2009. Following the closing of that site, the comment was posted here in September 2012.]

Mastering tools to monitor health disparities should precede expansion of monitoring

The article by Rosenthal et al.[1] suggests that health plans and employers should give greater attention to monitoring healthcare disparities. Currently, a great deal of healthcare disparities research is conducted by scientists and statisticians at government agencies, universities, and research institutes. By and large, this research is fundamentally flawed because of the failure of those conducting it to recognize the way standard measures of differences between outcome rates are affected by the overall prevalence of an outcome, as explained at length on the Measuring Health Disparities page [2] and related page of jpscanlan.com and the references those pages discuss and make available. See in particular references 3 and 4 to this comment.

Any additional attention that healthcare plans or employers give to healthcare disparities may be of some value in reducing the problems that arise from lack of attention. But until the scientific community better understands the problems with current research and masters tools for analyzing health and healthcare disparities that avoid those problems, it should be cautious about suggesting that less scientifically sophisticated entities get involved in the process.

References

1. Rosenthal MB, Landon Bruce E., Normand ST, et al. Engagement of health plans and employers in addressing racial and ethnic disparities in healthcare. *Med Care Res Rev* 2009;66(2):219-231.
2. <http://jpscanlan.com/measuringhealthdisp.html>
3. Scanlan JP. Measurement Problems in the National Healthcare Disparities Report, presented at American Public Health Association 135th Annual Meeting & Exposition, Washington, DC, Nov. 3-7, 2007: PowerPoint Presentation: http://www.jpscanlan.com/images/APHA_2007_Presentation.ppt;
Oral Presentation: http://www.jpscanlan.com/images/ORAL_ANNOTATED.pdf;
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4. Scanlan JP. Study illustrates ways in which the direction of a change in disparity turns on the measure chosen. *Pediatrics* Mar. 27, 2008 (responding to Morita JY, Ramirez E, Trick WE. Effect of school-entry vaccination requirements on racial and ethnic disparities in Hepatitis B immunization coverage among public high school students. *Pediatrics* 2008;121:e547-e552):
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