Medicare Urged to Help Reduce Health Disparities

By Alicia Ault

WASHINGTON — As one of the biggest and most influential payers in medicine, Medicare should use its clout to help reduce and eliminate the disparities in care for racial and ethnic minorities, according to a report from an independent panel of the National Academy of Social Insurance.

The report, along with an updated survey on health plans’ progress in identifying disparities, was released at a press briefing sponsored by the journal Health Affairs. NASHI, a Washington-based nonprofit organization of experts in Social Security, Medicare, and social insurance, issued 17 recommendations on how Medicare can improve quality of, and access to care for minorities, educate health care providers in cultural competence, and hold them accountable for reducing disparities.

About 9 million of Medicare’s 42 million beneficiaries are minorities who general-

The following are some of the key recommendations:

- Medicare should be provided to all racial and ethnic groups on a comparable basis.
- Medicare should collect data on racial and ethnic disparities and use it to improve health care quality.
- Medicare should work with health care providers to improve cultural competence.
- Medicare should ensure that patients have access to necessary health care services.
- Medicare should encourage research on racial and ethnic disparities.

The report also highlights the importance of cultural competence in health care. Cultural competence involves understanding and valuing differences in cultural backgrounds and using that knowledge to provide culturally sensitive care.

The report concludes that racial and ethnic disparities are not inevitable and that with the right strategies, Medicare can help reduce these disparities.


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