Case 83

Picker Institute

The Commonwealth Fund, 1994
Scott Kohler

Background. Dr. Harvey Picker was a pioneer of X-ray and ultrasound technology. In 1986, the small family foundation that he had founded with his wife Jean merged with The Commonwealth Fund. After Jean Picker was hospitalized with a life-threatening medical condition, the Pickers decided that the medical profession, despite its impressive technology and expertise, was insufficiently responsive to the concerns of its patients. To remedy the failing, they initiated the Picker/Commonwealth Program for Patient-Centered Care. It was to be a research organization seeking to determine what factors are most important to patients and whether health care providers are adequately responsive to patient preferences.

Strategy. Over the next seven years, the Commonwealth/Picker Program conducted extensive academic research, including over 8,000 interviews with patients and their families, as well as focus groups composed of dozens of caregivers. This research showed that patient’s preferences were too-often neglected, and that amenities, such as hospital food and access to parking, were given far too much significance in existing patient surveys. The Program also led to the definition of the seven dimensions of care that are most important to patients:

- Patients’ preferences are respected
- Coordination of care
- Information and education about their condition
- Physical comfort
- Emotional support
- Support for family and friends, and
- Continuity of care and transition to normal life

In 1994, the Commonwealth Program was chartered as an independent not-for-profit institution, supported by The Commonwealth Fund and overseen by Dr. Picker. It would provide research on the state of health care on the local, regional, and national level, and offer surveys which hospitals and HMOs could use to gauge their performance.

Outcomes. The Picker Institute developed a wide range of survey tools that quickly set the standard in performance measurement within the health care field. In addition to its own research, the Institute was a leading partner in the creation of the Consumer Assessment of Health Plans (CAHPS) surveys, developed in conjunction with Harvard Medical School, the Research Triangle Institute, and the RAND Corporation, that have been widely used to help Medicare recipients navigate the maze of options offered to them around the nation. As demand for Picker surveys increased, the Institute had difficulty running large-scale data collection, processing, and reporting, and so its survey instruments were acquired by the for-profit National Research Corporation.

Impact. The Picker Institute’s early research had a huge impact on the development of patient-
centered care in the United States. And the tools developed with Commonwealth funds continue to be widely used. The Picker+NRC Group conducts actionable performance measurement research for a wide range of clients, including hospitals, HMOs, and the U.S. Departments of Veterans Affairs and Defense, as well as the National Institutes of Health. And the Picker Institute Europe, which has remained an independent nonprofit, works to assist health care providers in improving patient-centered care internationally.

Notes

1201. Having decided that their $15 million could do more good as part of a larger pool of grantmaking funds, the Pickers chose the Commonwealth Fund because it was “an institution with a common interest in improving health care and a record of effective grantmaking, management, and leadership.” See http://www.cmwf.org/.
1203. Ibid. Since this early research, an eighth dimension—access to care—has been added to the list.
1204. Picker surveys are, for example, the standard used to evaluate and improve care at all of the VHA’s 163 hospitals and 800 clinics around the nation.