Health care improvements fail to keep pace with costs

A national report by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) shows that health care is improving in the U.S., but not among all segments of the population or as quickly as costs are rising. AHRQ says the quality of health care improved by an average rate of 2.5 percent per year between 1994 and 2005, however the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services estimated health care costs rose by a 6.7 percent average annual rate during those years.

“Health care quality is improving only modestly, at best,” cautioned AHRQ Director Carolyn M. Clancy, M.D. “Given that health care spending is rising much faster, these findings about quality underscore the urgency to improve the value Americans are getting for their health care dollars.”

A lack of health insurance appears to affect health care significantly. Only 18 percent of people without insurance went to a dentist at least once during the previous year, compared to 51 percent of people who had insurance. Racial disparities persist but are narrowing. Although Hispanics remain more likely than whites to get delayed care or no care at all for an illness, that gap decreased between 2001-2005 and 2004-2005. Black children between 19 and 55 months old remain less likely than white children to receive all recommended vaccines, but that disparity is also decreasing. Around 20 percent of adults with basic disabilities received delayed or no care, compared to 11 percent of people without disabilities. Among people who needed treatment for illicit drug use in 2005, only 18 percent of adults under 45 and 11 percent of children between 12 and 17 got treatment.

AHRQ’s quality and disparities reports are available online at www.ahrq.gov/qual/qrdr07.htm, by calling (800) 358-9295, or by e-mailing ahrqpubs@ahrq.hhs.gov.