

The LINGENFELTER LETTER



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ACA LIKELY TO WORSEN OVERUSE OF DIAGNOSTIC TESTS

Under the Affordable Care Act (ACA), emphasis has been placed on preventive services with the idea that it is much cheaper to prevent diseases than to cure them. If one considers prevention of disease to include eating healthier, losing weight, exercising more, eliminating smoking and living a healthier lifestyle, then prevention will be less costly than treating diseases. However, much of the emphasis under ACA is actually early detection rather than encouraging a healthy lifestyle. This emphasis will create overuse of testing, which in itself can create much harm.

The American Board of Internal Medicine Foundation, with the cooperation of individual medical groups, has spearheaded recommendations to curb unnecessary health care spending by limiting commonly overused tests and treatments. Their suggestions include not ordering routine imaging for lower back pain within the first six weeks, unless certain warning signs are present (to avoid overexposure to radiation), and not ordering annual EKGs for low risk patients without symptoms. This group has published its series of recommendations, known as "Choosing Wisely."

In a previous Lingenfelter Letter, we reported about the Rand Corporation's study that

indicated more health care did not necessarily lead to improved health and wellbeing for most individuals. When a physician does more, not only is it costly, but this can lead the physician to be distracted. For example, discovering through a blood test that a person who is feeling well has high cholesterol is really just discovering a risk factor and not a disease. Prescribing a statin medication to lower cholesterol might lower the probability of a heart attack, but the medication itself creates problems such as muscle weakness, liver damage and other potential complications. Emphasis on healthy lifestyle changes would have much more impact for most individuals than simply taking medication. Use of a statin costs about \$150,000 for every life it saves, since you have to treat several hundred people to prevent one heart attack.

Adverse events due to over testing and simple mistakes are not rare. Advance diagnostic testing finds more issues and physicians feel obligated to treat conditions even when a patient has no serious symptoms.

Charles (Chuck) Lingenfelter - is a senior consultant at Wilson Partners, LLC. Mr. Lingenfelter is responsible for the development of consulting services including data analysis, research, compliance, benefit plan management, market analysis, staff and client education.