

Collaborating with Cardiologists to Provide Higher Quality Care and Lower Costs

Overview

Independent Health's long history of partnering with physicians includes the establishment of The Primary Connection, an alliance of nearly 200 elite primary care physicians from 33 practices treating approximately 121,000 Independent Health members. Established in 2012, The Primary Connection aims to coordinate care with the most qualified specialists and hospitals who share a similar vision.

Over the past five years, Independent Health and The Primary Connection have had great success collaborating with select cardiologists, resulting in improved performance, higher quality care and reduced spending by the Western New York cardiology community.

Objective

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the U.S. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), about 610,000 Americans die from heart disease each year – roughly one in every four deaths.

Despite progress to reduce heart-related deaths, heart disease costs the U.S. about \$207 billion each year including health care services, medications and lost productivity.

Cardiology accounts for one of the highest shares of specialty physician spending in the U.S. and many services commonly performed or ordered by cardiologists have been identified by professional medical societies as contributing to overutilization.

In addition, the delivery of cardiac services can vary greatly across regions and hospitals, making this an area of significant importance in the effort to promote more efficient care and reduce costs.

In the fall of 2012, Independent Health invited a select group of six, forward-thinking cardiology groups to participate on a multi-year effort to decrease variation in cardiology services and move toward consistency in adhering to evidence-based medicine.

CASE STUDY

Independent Health and The Primary Connection are partnering with select cardiologists in Western New York to promote more efficient care and reduce the unsustainable trend of rising medical costs.

Results include:

- A reduction in cardiology costs from double-digit **increases** to a 3.5 percent aggregate cost **decrease**
- Less variation of care and closer adherence to evidence-based medicine
- Improved patient satisfaction



Approach

The engagement began with the formation of an advisory board of community cardiologists, the development of agreed-upon measurement criteria and a sharing of blinded, practice-specific data and quality measures so each practice could better understand their performance against their peers.

The participating cardiologists were able to provide their input to the data reports and provided a timeline to improve their performance before their data was shared with The Primary Connection practices. The cardiologists and primary care physicians also engaged in discussions to collectively improve care.

Measurement criteria included:

- Average cost of care (efficiency)
- Adherence to evidence-based medicine (quality)
- Variation in the types of services/procedures rendered

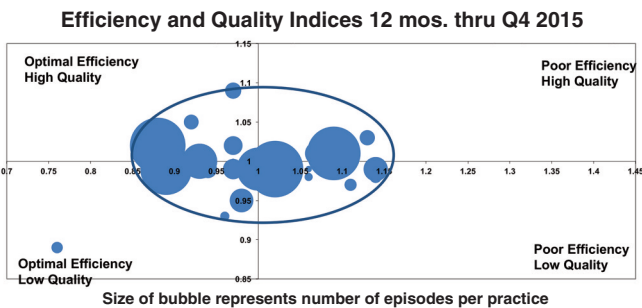
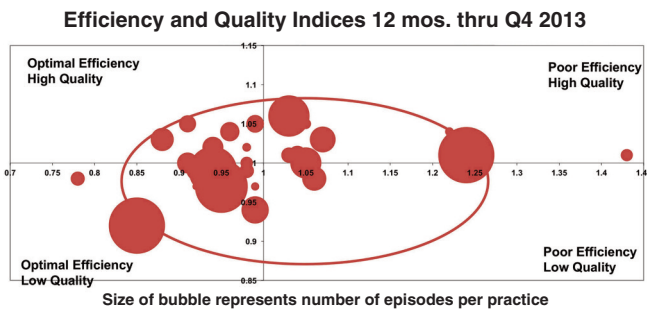
Beginning in 2014, the participating cardiologists agreed to share their data with their peer cardiologists as well as The Primary Connection physicians. This resulted in greater transparency, along with better communications and improved care coordination.

The Primary Connection practices used this data, along with other criteria, to shift referrals of their patients to higher-performing cardiologists.

Results

Performance reports from 2013 to 2015 showed the following positive results:

- A significant reduction in the variation of care and closer adherence to evidence-based medicine.
- A 3.5 percent aggregate cost **decrease** over the two-year period (compared to previous annual trend **increases** of 12 to 22 percent prior to the engagement).
- Improved patient satisfaction.



The clusters shown in the charts above indicate a shift to higher quality, more efficient care and a reduction in the variability of care.

Based on these results, Independent Health and The Primary Connection began developing long-term strategic partnerships with select cardiologists in the community during 2016. The criteria were based on performance (i.e., cost and quality), the cardiology group's market share and an overall level of interest expressed by the cardiologists.

This year, The Primary Connection is working with the cardiologists and the primary care physicians on further optimizing communication, collaboration and care coordination.

They are also using each practice's Electronic Medical Records (EMRs) to:

- Clearly indicate the reason for a referral to the cardiologist.
- Better determine the level of urgency for the visit.
- Consistently provide pertinent laboratory and diagnostic tests to the cardiologists that the primary care physician has already ordered and received (so the cardiologist doesn't have to duplicate any lab or diagnostic testing).

The participating cardiologists are making themselves more readily available via text and/or phone to assist the primary care physicians in need of immediate advice and additional guidance. The cardiologists are also creating first-line treatment guidelines and providing continuing medical education to the primary care physicians.

By agreeing with guiding principles of the engagement, i.e., designated referral protocols, care transition expectations and respective care management responsibilities, select cardiology groups are now considered strategic partners with The Primary Connection.

Patients continue to benefit since both The Primary Connection and the cardiology strategic partners agree to coordinate care in a manner that strives for high quality care that is both patient-centric and evidence-based.

In addition, similar engagement efforts and new strategic partnerships are being established with other specialties, such as:

- Gastroenterology
- Neurology
- Allergy
- Dermatology
- Pulmonology
- Otolaryngology

