SPECIAL COMMUNICATION

Clinical Practice Guidelines and Quality of Care for Older Patients With Multiple Comorbid Diseases
Implications for Pay for Performance

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The aging of the population and the increasing prevalence of chronic diseases pose challenges to the development and application of clinical practice guidelines (CPGs). In 1999, 48% of Medicare beneficiaries aged 65 years or older had at least 3 chronic medical conditions and 21% had 5 or more.1 Health care costs for individuals with at least 3 chronic conditions accounted for 89% of Medicare’s annual budget.1 Comorbidity is associated with poor quality of life, physical disability, high health care use, multiple medications, and increased risk for adverse drug events and mortality.2-4 Optimizing care for this population is a high priority.5

Clinical practice guidelines are based on clinical evidence and expert consensus to help decision making about treating specific diseases.6 Clinical practice guidelines help to define standards of care and focus efforts to improve quality.7,8 Most CPGs address single diseases in accordance with modern medicine’s focus on disease and pathophysiology.4 However, physi-

Context Clinical practice guidelines (CPGs) have been developed to improve the quality of health care for many chronic conditions. Pay-for-performance initiatives assess physician adherence to interventions that may reflect CPG recommendations.

Objective To evaluate the applicability of CPGs to the care of older individuals with several comorbid diseases.

Data Sources The National Health Interview Survey and a nationally representative sample of Medicare beneficiaries (to identify the most prevalent chronic diseases in this population); the National Guideline Clearinghouse (for locating evidence-based CPGs for each chronic disease).

Study Selection Of the 15 most common chronic diseases, we selected hypertension, chronic heart failure, stable angina, atrial fibrillation, hypercholesterolemia, diabetes mellitus, osteoarthritis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and osteoporosis, which are usually managed in primary care, choosing CPGs promulgated by national and international medical organizations for each.

Data Extraction Two investigators independently assessed whether each CPG addressed older patients with multiple comorbid diseases, goals of treatment, interactions between recommendations, burden to patients and caregivers, patient preferences, life expectancy, and the quality of the underlying scientific evidence, nor give guidance for incorporating patient preferences into treatment plans. If the relevant CPGs were followed, the hypothetical 79-year-old woman with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, hypertension, and osteoarthritis, we aggregated the recommendations from the relevant CPGs.

Data Synthesis Most CPGs did not modify or discuss the applicability of their recommendations for older patients with multiple comorbidities. Most also did not comment on burden, short- and long-term goals, and the quality of the underlying scientific evidence, nor give guidance for incorporating patient preferences into treatment plans. If the relevant CPGs were followed, the hypothetical patient would be prescribed 12 medications (costing her $406 per month) and a complicated nonpharmacological regimen. Adverse interactions between drugs and diseases could result.

Conclusions This review suggests that adhering to current CPGs in caring for an older person with several comorbidities may have undesirable effects. Basing standards for quality of care and pay for performance on existing CPGs could lead to inappropriate judgment of the care provided to older individuals with complex comorbidities and could create perverse incentives that emphasize the wrong aspects of care for this population and diminish the quality of their care. Developing measures of the quality of care needed by older patients with complex comorbidities is critical to improving their care.

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cians who care for older adults with multiple diseases must strike a balance between following CPGs and adjusting recommendations for individual patients’ circumstances. Difficulties escalate with the number of diseases the patient has.10

The limitations of current single-disease CPGs may be highlighted by the growth of pay-for-performance initiatives, which reward practitioners for providing specific elements of care.8 Because the specific elements of care are based on single-disease CPGs, pay-for-performance may create incentives for ignoring the complexity of multiple comorbid chronic diseases and dissuade clinicians from caring for individuals with multiple comorbid diseases. Quality-of-care standards based on these CPGs also may lead to unfair and inaccurate judgments of physicians’ care for this population.

We examined how CPGs address comorbidity in older patients and explored what happens when multiple single-disease CPGs are applied to a hypothetical 79-year-old woman with multiple comorbid diseases. We discuss the results in the context of incentives that are created by pay for performance and related health care initiatives.

METHODS

CPGs Included in the Review

To identify the diseases most prevalent in older individuals in the United States, we reviewed data from the National Health Interview Survey and a nationally representative sample of Medicare beneficiaries (5% of the National Analytic File).11 We defined a chronic disease as being present when a patient had 2 outpatient claims or 1 inpatient claim for the disease during 1999.

From the 15 most common chronic diseases, we selected 9 that are usually managed in primary care: hypertension, chronic heart failure, stable angina, atrial fibrillation, hypercholesterolemia, diabetes mellitus, osteoarthritis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and osteoporosis. We excluded depression and dementia to focus on patients who would be most likely to adhere to recommendations and understand health information.12,13 Among the 5% sample in 2001, half of the beneficiaries had at least 2 of these 9 chronic diseases and 80% had at least 1 other condition.1 We identified the most recently released (as of March 1, 2005) evidence-based CPGs promulgated for each chronic disease by national and international medical organizations using the National Guideline Clearinghouse.14-42

Data Abstraction

Our review was based on standards for developing and rating the quality of CPGs.43-48 Indications of high quality included describing the target population, grading the quality of evidence supporting recommendations, discussing therapeutic goals, addressing quality of life, and incorporating patient preferences. We examined the concepts of competing risks and burden of treatment for patients and caregivers because these issues are central in the care of older adults with multiple diseases.49,50

Two investigators (C.M.B. and J.D.) independently abstracted data from each CPG about applicability to individuals aged 65 years or older with multiple comorbid diseases and the quality of evidence for this population; indications for treatment, feasibility of treatment, or modified goals for treating the index disease in the setting of comorbid diseases; and duration of therapy necessary to achieve benefit in the context of life expectancy. We reviewed CPGs for discussion of patient-centered aspects of medical decision making including effects on quality of life defined as explicit discussion of quality of life, physical function, or symptoms such as pain and dyspnea; differentiation between short- and long-term effects, goals of treatment (eg, cure, arresting progression of disease, preventing complications, or managing symptoms); incorporation of patient preferences or shared decision making; and burden of following recommendations on patients and their unpaid caregivers defined as explicit discussion of burden, or of the aggregate weight or intensity of therapy to either patients or caregivers. Of 117 abstraction decisions, investigators disagreed on 22. All were resolved by consensus after discussion between reviewers. Most disagreements involved statements that appeared ambiguous to the reviewers; some explanation is provided in the tables and additional details are available on request from the authors.

Hypothetical Patient

We examined the feasibility of combining the treatment recommendations from relevant CPGs for a hypothetical 79-year-old woman with osteoporosis, osteoarthritis, type 2 diabetes mellitus, hypertension, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, all of moderate severity. We abstracted the recommendations (medications, self-monitoring, tests, environmental change, diet, exercise, involvement of specialists and other clinicians, and frequency of follow-up) from the relevant CPGs and assembled a comprehensive treatment plan using explicit instructions from CPGs whenever possible.19-40 We attempted to develop a treatment plan as simple and inexpensive as possible. When several options existed, we selected generic medications with the least frequent daily dosing and least potential for adverse effects. To reduce complexity of treatment, when possible we chose medications recommended for more than 1 condition and combined self-care activities whenever possible. We identified conflicts that emerged when relevant CPGs were applied (eg, potential adverse effects on other diseases when treating the target disease, interactions between recommended medications, and interactions between food and medications).

We tabulated the number of medications and medication doses per day. We quantified the complexity of the medication regimen by summing the number of different dosage schedules, weighted for dosing frequency (eg, once per day=1; 3 times per day=3).51 A regimen with 7 different medications consisting of 4 drugs taken once per day and 3 drugs taken twice per day generates a complexity score of $3 \times (1 + 2)$.author
A regimen with 1 drug taken once per day (nightly), 2 drugs taken twice per day, and 1 drug taken 3 times per day has a complexity score of 6 (1 + 2 + 3). We estimated the cost of the regimen and calculated anticipated out-of-pocket costs with coverage by Medicare’s Part D.12

RESULTS
Applicability of CPGs to Older Adults With Comorbid Illness

Although 7 of the 9 CPGs discussed older adults or comorbid diseases, only 4 CPGs (diabetes, osteoarthritis, atrial fibrillation, and angina) addressed older individuals with multiple comorbidities (Table 1 and Table 2).15-42 The CPGs addressing osteoarthritis, osteoporosis, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease did not discuss the quality of evidence underlying recommendations for older patients. Only the CPGs addressing diabetes and atrial fibrillation discussed the quality of evidence for older persons with several chronic diseases (Table 1 and Table 2). The diabetes CPG notes the absence of evidence favoring tight glycemic control for older patients and suggests that looser control may be appropriate for older adults or individuals with a limited life expectancy.

Table 1. Relevance of Clinical Practice Guidelines for the Treatment of Older Patients With Diabetes Mellitus, Hypertension, Osteoarthritis, Osteoporosis, and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chronic Disease Addressed by Guideline</th>
<th>Diabetes Mellitus19-32</th>
<th>Hypertension19</th>
<th>Osteoarthritis13-16</th>
<th>Osteoporosis40</th>
<th>COPD37,38</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality of evidence discussed for type of patient?</td>
<td>Older: yes Multiple comorbidities: yes Quality of evidence poor; requires extrapolation for nutrition recommendations</td>
<td>Older: yes Multiple comorbidities: no Quality of evidence good for treating hypertension in older patients</td>
<td>Older: no Multiple comorbidities: no</td>
<td>Older: no Multiple comorbidities: no</td>
<td>Older: no Multiple comorbidities: no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific recommendations for patients with 1 comorbid condition?</td>
<td>Yes Diseases: hypercholesterolemia, hypertension, congestive heart failure, chronic kidney disease, cardiovascular disease, peripheral vascular disease, benign prostatic hypertrophy</td>
<td>Yes Diseases: coronary artery disease, diabetes mellitus, metabolic syndrome, sleep apnea, chronic kidney disease, gout, left ventricular hypertrophy, erectile dysfunction, peripheral vascular disease, congestive heart failure, stroke, dementia,* renal transplantation, renal artery stenosis, urinary outflow obstruction</td>
<td>Yes Diseases/drugs: anticoagulants, glucocorticoids, peptic ulcer disease, chronic kidney disease, hypertension, congestive heart failure</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific recommendations for patients with several comorbid conditions?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time needed to treat to benefit from treatment in the context of life expectancy discussed?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Limited to the possible effects of antihypertensive treatment on preventing cognitive decline, not management of hypertensive patients with mild cognitive impairment or dementia.†Limited to patients at highest risk of gastrointestinal tract bleeding with certain therapies.
The angina CPG discussed life expectancy in the context of interventions that could lead to invasive procedures but did not address duration of treatment required to achieve benefit.

**Inclusion of Patient-Centered Domains in CPGs**

None of the CPGs discussed the burden of comprehensive treatment on patients or caregivers. Three (hypertension, angina, and hypercholesterolemia) acknowledged patients’ financial burden; the diabetes CPG mentioned the discomfort and inconvenience of self-monitoring blood glucose. The atrial fibrillation CPG noted that quality of life can be affected by drug interactions and the need for frequent blood tests in patients taking warfarin. None discussed balancing short-and long-term goals, such as when short-term quality of life is better without a treatment that provides long-term benefits. The osteoporosis and hypercholesterolemia CPGs did not discuss quality of life. Seven of the CPGs discussed patients’ preferences about medical care, but this was often without guidance for incorporating preferences. Only the chronic heart failure CPG explicitly discussed preferences for end-of-life treatment.

**Applying CPGs to a Hypothetical Patient**

Applying the relevant CPGs to the hypothetical 79-year-old patient, we generated a possible treatment schedule that would result if all the recommendations in the CPGs were followed (Table 3 and Box). The patient would take 12 separate medications with a medication complexity score of 14.31 This regimen requires 19 doses per day, taken at 5 times during a typical day, assuming that albuterol “as needed” is taken twice daily, plus weekly alendronate.

Some nonpharmacological recommendations apply to more than 1 disease. Fourteen nonpharmacological activities are recommended for this patient if all nutritional recommendations are pooled into one. The CPGs also recommend one-time educational and rehabilitative interventions, and monitoring of the patient’s chronic diseases from daily to biennial intervals depending on the type of monitoring. It theoretically would be possible to compress all monitoring into 2 to 4 primary care visits and 1 ophthalmologic visit per year. However, patients often have several clinicians,33 although in some regions and managed care settings most care may be provided by a primary care team.34 All elements of the treatment plan cannot easily be addressed in a 15-minute office visit.35,36

Interactions that could result from concurrent adherence to all 5 CPGs (Table 4) include between a medica-

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**Table 2. Relevance of Clinical Practice Guidelines for the Treatment of Older Patients With Atrial Fibrillation, Chronic Heart Failure, Angina, and Hypercholesterolemia**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chronic Disease Addressed by Guidelines</th>
<th>Guideline addressed treatment for type of patient?</th>
<th>Quality of evidence discussed for type of patient?</th>
<th>Specific recommendations for patients with 1 comorbid condition?</th>
<th>Specific recommendations for patients with several comorbid conditions?</th>
<th>Time needed to treat to benefit from treatment in the context of life expectancy discussed?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atrial Fibrillation†</td>
<td>Older: yes</td>
<td>Older: yes</td>
<td>Yes Diseases: congestive heart failure, hypertension, diabetes mellitus, angina, left ventricular hypertrophy, Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, hyperthyroidism, pregnancy, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic Heart Failure‡</td>
<td>Older: yes</td>
<td>Older: yes</td>
<td>Yes Diseases: hypertension, diabetes mellitus, hypercholesterolemia, angina, atrial fibrillation, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease</td>
<td>Yes*: only for combination of cardiovascular diseases</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angina††</td>
<td>Older: yes</td>
<td>Older: yes</td>
<td>Yes Diseases: hypertension, diabetes mellitus, hypercholesterolemia, congestive heart failure, aortic valve stenosis, valvular heart disease, asthma, heart block, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, atrial fibrillation, peripheral vascular disease, hyperthyroidism, chronic kidney disease, depression, migraine</td>
<td>Yes*: only for combination of diabetes mellitus and cardiovascular disease</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypercholesterolemia‡‡</td>
<td>Older: yes</td>
<td>Older: yes</td>
<td>Yes Diseases: hypertension, diabetes mellitus, cardiovascular disease</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Limited to weighing severe comorbidity likely to limit life expectancy when considering treatment procedures that would lead to revascularization; asking patients in follow-up about presence of new comorbid illnesses; and the effect of severity of or treatment for comorbidities on angina. Older patients with severe angina and several comorbid illnesses may be satisfied with a reduction in symptoms that enables an improvement in physical disability.

†Limited to multiple comorbid conditions that increase cardiovascular risk (no discussion of comorbidities other than combination of diabetes mellitus and cardiovascular disease).

‡Secondary prevention trials included older persons. Guideline reports that PROSPER authors state that statin use can be extended to older persons. Conflicting data on cancer risk with statins; statins have no effect on cognition or progression of disability.
COPD, other chronic diseases. The use of single-disease CPGs as a basis for evaluating the quality of care and determining physician reimbursement through pay-for-performance measures could create inappropriate incentives in the care of older adults with multiple diseases.

Payment to physicians in pay-for-performance programs is frequently based in part on their meeting quality-of-care standards created for single diseases, which may not adequately capture the care needs of patients with multiple chronic diseases.

**Comment**

This review provides evidence that CPGs do not provide an appropriate, evidence-based foundation for assessing quality of care in older adults with several chronic diseases. Although CPGs provide detailed guidance for managing single diseases, they fail to address the needs of older patients with complex comorbid illness. While some recommend interventions for specific pairs of diseases, CPGs rarely address treatment of patients with 3 or more chronic diseases—a group that includes half of the population older than 65 years. When we developed a treatment plan for a hypothetical patient using a conservative regimen created in accordance with CPGs, she was treated with multiple medications with high complexity, with the attendant risks of medication errors, adverse drug events, drug interactions, and hospitalization.

The recommended regimens may present the patient with an unsustainable treatment burden, making independent self-management and adherence difficult.

It is evident that CPGs, designed largely by specialty-dominated committees for managing single diseases, provide clinicians little guidance about caring for older patients with multiple chronic diseases. The use of single-disease CPGs as a basis for evaluating the quality of care and determining physician reimbursement through pay-for-performance measures could create inappropriate incentives in the care of older adults with multiple diseases.
While these standards are not explicitly taken directly from CPGs, they are often derived from CPG recommendations. The Medicare Payment Advisory Commission recommended that Medicare adopt pay for performance for physician reimbursement. The Commission suggests a trial period during which physician reimbursement would be based on adoption of information technology measures, with feedback to individual physicians on performance on condition-specific claims-based process measures, followed by a "date certain" when condition-specific claims-based process measures would be included in physician pay for performance. Medicare initiatives and demonstrations incorporating pay for performance are becoming increasingly common.

The CPGs are not designed for use in quality assessment, so transforming CPGs into performance standards and applying these standards to the care of older patients with complex comorbidity is problematic. These guidelines are recommendations based on varying levels of evidence and assume application of clinical judgment and patient preferences, both of which would be difficult to measure in a pay-for-performance scheme. Quality indicators must balance scientific evidence against what is practical and feasible to measure rather than what is a higher priority (e.g., assessing yearly screening for retinopathy rather than aggressive blood pressure control in diabetics). Many indicators have upper age limits (e.g., <75 years), thereby excluding a large percentage of Medicare beneficiaries and removing incentives to focus on these patients. Most indicators do not address burden of comorbid disease. While it would be feasible to omit "sick" patients from computations for reporting purposes, this would remove the pay-for-performance incentive for improving care for such patients.

Box. Recommendations Based on Clinical Practice Guidelines for a Hypothetical 79-Year-Old Woman With Hypertension, Diabetes Mellitus, Osteoarthritis, Osteoporosis, and COPD

**Patient Tasks**
- Joint protection
- Energy conservation
- Exercise
  - Non-weight-bearing if severe foot disease present or weight-bearing for osteoporosis
  - Aerobic exercise for 30 min on most days
  - Muscle strengthening
  - Range of motion
- Avoid environmental exposures that might exacerbate chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- Wear appropriate footwear
- Limit intake of alcohol
- Maintain normal body weight (body mass index of between 18.5 and 24.9)

**Clinician Tasks**
- Administer vaccine
  - Pneumonia
  - Influenza annually
- Check blood pressure at all clinician visits and sometimes at home†
- Evaluate self-monitoring of blood glucose
- Foot examination at all clinician visits if neuropathy present; otherwise check feet for protective sensation, structure, biomechanics, vascular status, and skin integrity annually
- Laboratory tests
  - Microalbuminuria annually if not already present
  - Creatinine level and electrolytes at least 1 to 2 times per year
  - Cholesterol levels annually
  - Liver function biannually
  - Glycosylated hemoglobin level biannually to quarterly, depending on level of control
- Referrals
  - Physical therapy
  - Ophthalmologic examination
  - Pulmonary rehabilitation
  - Dual-energy x-ray absorptiometry scan every other year
- Patient education
  - High-risk foot conditions, foot care, and foot wear
  - Osteoarthritis
  - COPD medication and delivery system training
  - Diabetes mellitus

*See asterisk footnote in Table 3 for a list of the clinical practice guidelines used.
†Ambulatory blood pressure monitoring is helpful if “white coat hypertension” is suspected and no target organ damage, apparent drug resistance, hypotensive symptoms with antihypertensive medication, or episodic hypertension.
Potential Treatment Interactions for a Hypothetical 79-Year-Old Woman with 5 Chronic Diseases

### Table 4. Potential Treatment Interactions for a Hypothetical 79-Year-Old Woman with 5 Chronic Diseases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Disease</th>
<th>Medications With Potential Interactions</th>
<th>Medication and Other Disease</th>
<th>Medications for Different Diseases</th>
<th>Medication and Food</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hypertension</td>
<td>Hydrochlorothiazide, lisinopril</td>
<td>Diabetes: diuretics increase serum glucose and lipids*</td>
<td>Diabetes medications: hydrochlorothiazide may decrease effectiveness of glyburide</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes</td>
<td>Glyburide, metformin, aspirin, and atorvastatin</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Osteoarthritis medications: NSAIDs plus aspirin increase risk of bleeding</td>
<td>Aspirin plus alcohol: increased risk of gastrointestinal tract bleeding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osteoarthritis</td>
<td>NSAIDs</td>
<td>Hypertension: NSAIDs: raise blood pressure†; NSAIDs plus hypertension increase risk of renal failure</td>
<td>Diabetes medications: NSAIDs in combination with aspirin increase risk of bleeding</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osteoporosis</td>
<td>Calcium, alendronate</td>
<td>Diabetes medications: calcium may decrease efficacy of aspirin; aspirin plus alendronate can cause upset stomach</td>
<td>Hypertension medications: NSAIDs decrease efficacy of diuretics</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: NA, no interaction is known; NSAIDs, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs.

*Thiazide-type diuretics may worsen hyperglycemia, but effect thought to be small and not associated with increased incidence of cardiovascular events.
†This interaction is noted to be particularly relevant for individuals with diabetes; no recommendation for treatment is given.

### Table 5. Cost of Medications to Patient*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disease and Medication</th>
<th>Monthly Cost, $</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hypertension</td>
<td>13.99, 24.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hydrochlorothiazide</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisinopril</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes mellitus</td>
<td>24.00, 51.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glyburide</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metformin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entecicoated aspirin</td>
<td>1.21, 62.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lovastatin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osteoarthritis</td>
<td>10.99, 93.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naproxen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omeprazole</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osteoporosis</td>
<td>65.99, 6.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alendronate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcium plus vitamin D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease</td>
<td>37.99, 13.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ipratropium</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atropine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>406.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Assuming no prescription drug coverage.

Patients in whom single-disease standards cannot or should not be attained, but who are eligible to be in the population base for a given standard may become “medical hot potatoes” if their physician receives lower pay-for-performance scores as a result. Current pay-for-performance initiatives can create financial incentives for physicians to focus on certain diseases and younger or healthier Medicare patients. These initiatives perpetuate the single-disease approach to care and fail to reward physicians for addressing the complex issues that confront patients with several chronic diseases. Standards that define quality of patient care regardless of a patient’s health status and preferences by placing emphasis on attaining high rates of adherence to CPGs rather than the more difficult task of weighing burden, risks, and benefits of complex therapies in shared decision making could ultimately undermine quality of care. If quality assessment focuses on younger or healthier patients, there is additional risk that these problems will go unnoticed.

Quality-of-care standards are needed for older individuals with several chronic diseases. Critical but currently unreimbursed processes of high-quality care for this population include care coordination, patient and caregiver education, empowerment for self-management, and shared decision making that incorporates individual preferences and circumstances. These processes should be incorporated into quality-of-care standards in pay-for-performance initiatives.

Standards for developing CPGs note the importance of identifying the target population and incorporating quality of life and patient preferences to improve adherence of both physicians and patients. The CPGs we examined do not give explicit guidance on how to do this. Providing optimal care, as defined by several CPGs, for the patient with comorbid conditions quickly becomes difficult in terms of cost, medi-
CPGs for Older Patients with Multiple Comorbid Diseases

Coexisting diseases may increase or decrease the benefit of an intervention for a target disease. Future CPGs that address how to incorporate quality of life and the risks, benefits, and burden of recommended treatments for older adults with comorbidity would be more useful than currently existing CPGs, but training physicians to use CPGs while incorporating these principles is also critical. The guidelines could address common co-morbidities, but more obscure co-morbidities would be difficult to address. Clinical practice guidelines addressing several combinations of comorbid diseases would be more unwieldy and based on scant evidence. To provide evidence for optimal care of older patients with several chronic diseases, future trials should include older patients with representative comorbidities and should investigate shared decision making among those patients, their caregivers, and physicians.

A few noteworthy efforts address these issues. A recent CPG for older adults with diabetes discusses the quality of evidence and gives practical advice about geriatric syndromes and prioritizing care for older persons with several chronic diseases. The Assessing Care of Vulnerable Elders Project proposes quality-of-care markers for chronic diseases and geriatric syndromes in frail older adults and recognizes that goals of care and preferences affect definitions of quality. Patient-reported measures of quality of care address access, continuity, coordination, communication, and empowerment for patient and family involvement. Some pay-for-performance standards include provision of educational resources and measures of patient experience.

Our analysis has several limitations. First, we did not attempt to examine all CPGs. Instead, we selected CPGs generated by prominent professional organizations and published in widely read journals, which are likely to have a high impact on clinical practice. There may be less well-known CPGs that provide better guidance for the care of older adults with multiple chronic diseases. Second, in designing the treatment regimen for our hypothetical patient, we used our clinical judgment when the CPGs were not explicit in their recommendations—a task clinicians face daily. While other clinicians might arrive at slightly different regimens, we believe they would have similar complexity.

For the present, widely used CPGs offer little guidance to clinicians caring for older patients with several chronic diseases. The use of CPGs as the basis for pay-for-performance initiatives that focus on specific treatments for single diseases may be particularly unsuited to the care of older individuals with multiple chronic diseases. Quality improvement and pay-for-performance initiatives within the Medicare system should be designed to improve the quality of care for older patients with multiple chronic diseases; a critical first step is research to define the quality of the care needed by this population, including care coordination, education, empowerment for self-management, and shared decision making based on the individual circumstances of older patients.

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