

Executive Summary



Understanding Patient, Family Caregiver and Health Care Team Member ACO Experiences

Study finds ACOs provide better care and outcomes for patients and a better practice experience for members of the health care team than traditional fee for service

Background

The research was conducted with the approval of the Heartland Institutional Review Board and funded by Arnold Ventures. It included a literature review and interviews with 27 participants—12 patients and caregivers and 15 members of the health care team. The study sought to capture diverse viewpoints on ACO experiences, particularly focusing on medically complex patients. Interviews spanned a range of geographies and payer types such as Medicare, Medicare Advantage, Medicaid and commercial and participants were compensated for their time.

This study, conducted by the American Heart Association, aimed to understand the experience of medically complex patients, their family caregivers and health care team members involved in Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs) compared to traditional fee for service, which incentivizes the provision of more—not better—care. These ACOs, which hold providers accountable for both cost and quality of care, aim to improve patient experiences and overall health while utilizing health care resources more efficiently. The study provides insights into how ACOs improve patient care and outcomes, enhance care coordination and foster a better practice environment for health care professionals. It involved interviews with patients, caregivers and health care team members, all of whom provided feedback on their experiences within the ACO framework.



Key Findings

1 Better Patient Care and Outcomes in ACOs



Patients and caregivers overwhelmingly reported that ACOs provide better care compared to traditional fee for service. This was attributed to strong primary care relationships, care coordination and a team-based approach that includes care managers, social workers and other professionals.



Enhanced patient engagement is a key benefit, as patients feel more supported, have more time with providers and experience better communication. The ACO model also enables a more holistic approach to care, addressing physical, mental and health-related social needs.



Patients cited the provision of resources such as transportation, food, housing and financial assistance as crucial to improving their overall well-being and quality of life.



For one patient, the relationship she developed with her care team was a highlight to her ACO experience:

“They treat me as an individual, as a person and not an ailment. They are very hands on and explain everything well. And I love the chronic care manager because she is great and responsive.”

She went on to say that regarding her health-related social needs, her PCP, therapist and social worker have been able to connect her to resources such as the local food pharmacy and to transportation.

2 Improved Experience for Health Care Team Members



Health care team members, including physicians, nurse practitioners, care managers, social workers, community health workers and pharmacists, agreed that ACOs enable them to deliver better care to complex patients. The multidisciplinary, team-based approach allows for comprehensive care that addresses all aspects of a patient’s health.



Practicing within an ACO environment was seen as beneficial for providers, allowing them to focus on what they do best while providing better patient outcomes. ACOs were praised for expanding access to care, reducing physician burden and allowing greater attention to patient populations with complex health needs.

For one care manager, practicing in an ACO allows the health care team to optimize patient care:

“Providing care under the ACO is better for patients because it results in better condition management, understanding of their condition and what they need to do, which results in improved health, longevity, quality and quantity of life. The focus on keeping patients healthy and out of hospital, encouraging them to make lifestyle changes and improving their adherence, helps to make patients feel better physically and mentally.”



3 Technology and Performance Tracking



ACOs employ technology that enables better tracking of patient outcomes and performance, allowing for more efficient care and communication. This includes virtual visits, real-time performance assessments and bidirectional communication between health care team members.

Ultimately, the study found that ACOs deliver higher-quality care for medically complex patients, foster improved patient engagement and enhance the practice environment for health care professionals. **The findings advocate for further expansion and refinement of the ACO model to improve health care delivery and outcomes.**

