

Contact: Maja Fiket (773) 702-6241
fi.maja@googlemail.com

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\$4 million AHRQ grant supports research to improve hospital care

The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) has awarded \$4 million over the next four years to a University of Chicago-based research team to establish a Center for Education and Research on Therapeutics (CERT) that will focus on the emerging field of hospital medicine and economics.

The grant will help to create "a powerful research and education infrastructure to produce and disseminate knowledge about the use and cost-effectiveness of hospital-based therapy, including drugs, biological products, and devices," said the center's principal investigator, David Meltzer, MD, PhD, associate professor of medicine, economics and public policy at the University of Chicago.

Hospital care has changed radically in the past decade. The use of clinical information systems and systematic approaches to organizing care has increased dramatically. At the same time, hospitalists -- physicians who specialize in the care of hospitalized patients -- have come to play a very large role in the management of such patients. These trends make "the production and dissemination of knowledge about the effective and cost-effective use of hospital therapeutics especially timely and important," Meltzer said.

He will lead a team of 28 experts from diverse backgrounds who will search for ways to improve the effectiveness and reduce the cost of hospital care. Although based at the University of Chicago, the CERT includes researchers from the National Opinion Research Center, the University of Illinois-Chicago School of Pharmacy, the Society for Hospital Medicine, and Consorta, Inc, a national network of more than 500 hospitals.

Research at the Chicago CERT will focus on a series of specific projects, said Meltzer, such as how an individual's genes affect his or her response to warfarin, a difficult-to-manage anti-clotting drug. They will develop new performance measures for treatment of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, a leading cause of hospitalizations, deaths, and healthcare expenditures in the U.S. They also plan to construct an electronic record of off-label prescribing and to study how social-network analysis can be applied to quality-improvement teams.

The Center will study how best to translate and disseminate such knowledge through seminar presentations, teaching modules and materials, a website, a fellowship program for intensive training in research methods for academic and community-based health professionals, and consultations with caregivers, policy-makers, regulators and patients. It will also include a core clinical-economics support team, led by Meltzer, to support clinical economics projects by CERT investigators.

The CERT will be supported through the University's Center for Health and the Social Sciences (CHeSS), which supports interdisciplinary research and training. It builds on more than 10 years of studies involving more than 80,000 patients of hospital care, performed through the University's hospital medicine program.

Established in 1997, the AHRQ's Centers for Education and Research on Therapeutics Program now supports 11 research centers dedicated to advancing the optimal use of therapeutics through developing knowledge, managing risk, improving practice, and informing policy makers. The breadth of expertise in the CERTs, according to AHRQ Director Carolyn M. Clancy, M.D., will "help the health care system make measurable improvements in the quality and safety of therapeutics and health care."

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