You Can Help Reduce Health Care Disparities

A report from a trusted source for science and medical information—the Institute of Medicine—stated that the “U.S. health care delivery system does not provide consistent, high-quality medical care to all people,” and highlighted differences in care given to minorities and non-minorities.

Many studies reach a similar conclusion: Once patients get to the doctor’s office or hospital, the care they get can differ due to their race, ethnicity, and language. Although prejudice can sometimes be a factor, the real problem can be less obvious. For example, language or culture differences between patients and their doctors or nurses can make it harder to understand and communicate with each other.

One way to fix the problem of health care disparities is to collect data on and compare the quality of care that people of different races, ethnicities and languages get. Doing so allows doctors to identify patterns in the care they give, and to make sure they give all their patients—regardless of who they are, where they come from, or what challenges they face—the best care possible.

Why should patients participate?

Many doctors’ offices, hospitals, clinics and health plans now ask patients to answer questions about their race, ethnicity, and language. You may wonder why these questions are important to getting the health care you need. There is a good reason to collect such information: it will help your doctor or hospital deliver care equally to you and all patients.

Some patients are not comfortable talking about personal information that isn’t clearly related to their visit and no one can force anyone to answer questions about their race, ethnicity, or language. But, keep in mind that the survey is a quick and easy way for you to share information with your health care provider so they can improve care for all patients. If you do decide to share your information, you should know that the information you provide is confidential – it won’t be shared or sold – and your privacy is protected by law.

But don’t they already know the answers?

The staff members at the doctor or hospital who ask you about race, ethnicity and language might be able to guess many of the answers. But guessing is not good enough because many guesses are wrong. Getting it exactly right matters a lot, because it helps make sure that everyone is getting the care they need and deserve. So please take a minute to answer the questions. It makes a big difference!

1 “Crossing the Quality Chasm: A New Health Care System for the 21st Century.” Institute of Medicine,
http://www.iom.edu/CMS/8089.aspx