

Improving Health Care: One Man's Story

Note: Details and events of this story are accurate but the names of both patient and facility have been changed to protect confidentiality.

People with Medicare coverage like Ohio's James Wilson, 77, are changing America's health care system for the better.

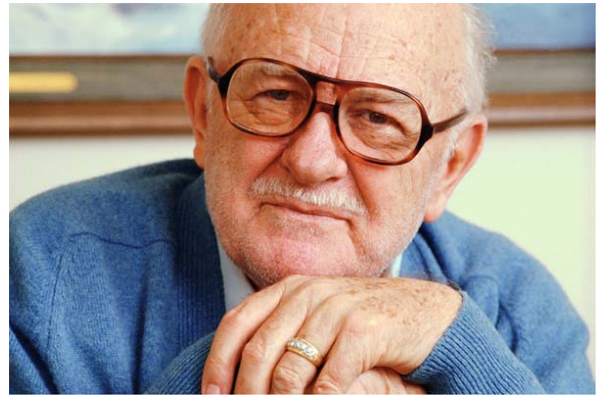
Wilson, a retired pipe fitter, is probably not the kind of person you would suspect would be helping health care providers improve the quality of their care. In a life filled with grandkids and hobbies, Wilson hadn't given much thought to what ails America's health care delivery system—until his hip surgery.

Wilson called the Medicare Beneficiary Complaint Line because he “just didn't feel good” about the care he received while a patient at Blue Skies Nursing and Rehabilitation Center after his surgery.

Wilson was especially bothered by the fact that no one at the nursing home ever told him about whether his hip incision was infected. His doctor had said that this was something that needed to be checked out. He wondered if other “balls were being dropped” by the busy nursing home staff as they moved from patient to patient.

Wilson was right to voice his concerns. Health care experts have long advised that patients, and their loved ones, must be their own advocates if they want to ensure they are getting quality care.

Wilson saw on the paperwork he signed when he was admitted to Blue Skies that he



should call Medicare at 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227) if he was concerned about the quality of his care. So he did.

Medicare referred him to Ohio's Medicare Quality Improvement Organization (QIO), Ohio KePRO. The call was handled by a professional. Wilson could tell she had been doing this work for some time. Her questions went right to the heart of the matter: “What concerned you?” “Did you tell your doctor, or any of the staff at Blue Skies, about your concerns?” “Has your family talked to the nursing home's staff about your concerns?”

Wilson had no way of knowing how important his call could be. “Red flags” like this often lead to real improvements in health care delivery.

Because of Wilson's call, the QIO contacted the Medical Director at Blue Skies to request Mr. Wilson's medical record. The QIO's staff wanted to find out whether he received appropriate care: Did he have a care plan? Had his incision been checked for infection?

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Far from easing concerns, the information in the medical record caused the QIO staff to request that Blue Skies submit a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP). The QIO gave the nursing home's staff a sample QIP to help them make their own plan to improve Mr. Wilson's care.

It was found that, despite the doctor's order, there was no record of Mr. Wilson's hip incision having been checked for infection. Also, the QIO's staff could not find any evidence of a care plan for this patient. A care plan is a basic document that every nursing home should complete for each patient.

You might think that a health care provider would be unhappy to learn that an outside organization was checking on the quality of the care it delivers. However, the opposite is usually true. In fact, health care providers often welcome outside help on quality issues. Providers understand that even the best health care provider has to constantly check on the way it does things to ensure that quality stays high.

At Blue Skies, the staff welcomed the QIO's offer to assist them in building a QIP. One of the requirements in the QIP is that a care plan is created for every Blue Skies patient when they are admitted.

The QIP also requires that all patient care plans be updated at least quarterly. In addition, the QIP includes a rule that doctor's orders, like the one telling Blue Skies' staff to check Mr. Wilson's hip incision for infection, be checked daily.

Soon after the QIP was put in place, the QIO checked patient records and found that doctors' orders were being followed 98 percent of the time. Also, care plans had been created for 89 percent of patients.

A check three months later resulted in an A+ for the nursing home: all doctors' orders were being followed and all patients had care plans.

The staff at the QIO is no longer reviewing Blue Skies' patient charts, but work with the facility is ongoing. The staff members at the nursing home owe a debt to James Wilson. He brought to light his quality of care concerns and helped Medicare improve health care.

To contact the QIO in your state, call 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227).

The American Health Quality Association represents the national network of Quality Improvement Organizations (QIOs) that work to encourage the spread of best clinical practices and improve systems of care delivery. Read more about AHQA and the QIOs at www.abqa.org.