

The American Heart Association conducted 12 confidential interviews with medically complex patients and/or their family caregivers who receive care through an Accountable Care Organization (ACO) model. 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 patients interviewed here ranged from 36 to over 75 years old and included a mix of patients with Original Medicare, Medicare Advantage, Medicaid and other payers. Despite differences in the size and services of the ACOs, common themes and goals emerged.



Common Themes in Patient Perceptions

Person-Centered Care and Communication



One of the defining characteristics of ACOs is the strong, ongoing relationship patients have with their primary care providers (PCPs). This relationship anchors patient care, helping to identify gaps early and ensuring preventive care is prioritized. Patients frequently highlighted the significance of this relationship in addressing both acute and long-term health issues. This continuity of care through a trusted primary provider is a distinguishing factor of the ACO model and important for coordinating specialized care and addressing preventive health needs.

Overall, patients reported feeling heard, respected and valued by their health care teams. One patient with severe breathing issues from Delaware, highlighted this, stating that her primary care provider **“is very attentive to my needs”** and that staff are **“outstanding. I’ve had no problems and have always felt well taken care of.”** Such personal attention fosters trust, with patients feeling that their providers view them as individuals and not just as sick people. Patients also feel they are not treated differently for any reason. Another patient with congestive heart failure from North Carolina, reported, **“they treat us like we are family almost.”**

Communication between patients and their care teams was frequently noted as a strength. Patients appreciated timely responses through phone calls, patient portals and telehealth, which were especially important for those with mobility challenges.

SPOTLIGHT

One Patient’s Story

One patient, a 36-year-old Black widowed mother of three young children, faced numerous challenges after losing her husband to a rapid progression of infections. Living with gradually worsening hearing loss and now on Medicare due to disability, her grief compounded her existing depression and led to debilitating anxiety. The loss of her husband’s income added financial strain to their struggles and left the family reliant on Medicaid. Despite her naturally optimistic nature, she found herself overwhelmed by fear and uncertainty.

The patient’s life took a positive turn when she connected with her ACO. The nurse practitioner (NP) played a pivotal role in the patient recovery, recognizing her need for additional support and referring her to a social worker. This referral opened doors to crucial resources, including group therapy and assistance with basic needs. The patient credits the ACO team, especially the NP, with helping her through the hardest part of her life. She shares. **“The NP cared, understood and listened to me. It changed my dynamic. I wish everyone could experience the care I had. This was a blessing in disguise. They really gave me life. I feel way better than ever.”**

Common Themes in Patient Perceptions



Coordinated and Holistic Care

One of the primary goals of ACOs is to improve coordination across health care providers, and patients consistently described experiencing seamlessly coordinated care. For example, one patient spoke highly of the communication between his various specialists and his PCP, stating he is **“so grateful for how all the doctors work together.”** Another patient also sees multiple specialists and noted that there was no disconnect between her providers. Coordination among providers not only ensures that care plans are aligned but also reduces the likelihood of unnecessary hospitalizations or duplicated tests.

Beyond medical care, ACOs often address patients’ non-medical needs, which are crucial for maintaining overall health. The widowed mother of three from Pennsylvania emphasized how her ACO connected her to mental health resources and helped with utility and food assistance. Holistic care, addressing physical, mental and health-related social needs, is especially beneficial for patients facing complex challenges.



Enhanced Access to Care and Support

Access to care and support, especially for high-risk patients, is another key benefit of the ACO model. Patients frequently described being able to quickly schedule appointments and access urgent care when needed. One patient said she could easily schedule appointments through a mobile app and regularly utilizes telehealth for non-routine visits. Another patient also remarked on the convenience of telehealth appointments, allowing her to access care despite her inability to drive. Another patient and his wife praised their care manager, noting, **“when we have extra things that come up like a UTI or getting sick with the flu, we call our care manager, and she gets us in and gets us the help we need... immediately.”** The presence of care managers or chronic care coordinators was a common and valued aspect of ACO care, providing an extra layer of support.

Improved Health Outcomes



Several patients reported that their care through ACOs helped improve their health outcomes and quality of life. One patient stated regarding his ACO, **“they helped me so much to get me healthy. It was tremendous. They kept me out of the hospital.”** The patient from Pennsylvania also credited her care team for helping her manage anxiety and depression after the loss of her husband, stating, **“They gave me life again. It is by far the best experience I have ever had. They are out there looking out for me...”** Patients who received care through ACOs often felt more empowered to manage their health, given the support and education provided by their care teams.

Conclusion

Patients receiving care through ACOs commonly report positive experiences, largely due to the model’s focus on person-centered, coordinated and holistic care. Enhanced communication, improved access to services and attention to both mental and health-related social needs contribute to better health outcomes and overall patient satisfaction. For policymakers and consumer advocacy groups, supporting the continued development and refinement of ACOs can play a pivotal role in improving health care delivery for complex and high-risk patients.

