

National Medical Association Supports Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services

Guest Editorial by Rodney G. Hood, MD, President, National Medical Association
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The National Medical Association (NMA) supports the HHS Office of Minority Health's (OMH) commitment and efforts to develop the Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) Standards. The final standards provide comprehensive direction to health care organizations and medical professionals on what they can do to ensure that patients/consumers are able to access health care that is sensitive to their cultural backgrounds and linguistic needs.

However, NMA believes there must be tools in place to ensure that the CLAS Standards are enforced. Without federal enforceability of each of these standards, there is no effective means of ensuring that our nation's proficiency in providing culturally and linguistically sensitive health care improves in any way.

In spite of the fact that this nation has experienced tremendous advances in biomedical research and the practice of medicine, the benefits of these developments have not fully translated into better health status or health care for African Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities. In fact, communities of color continue to be unduly plagued by disproportionate rates of death and disease. The CLAS Standards are extremely critical. If properly implemented and administered, these standards will help to eliminate the racial biases and practices that unfortunately influence the manner in which care is delivered today.

CLAS Standards 1-3 address the critical need for health care organizations to ensure that their staffs reflect the communities they serve and that they are sensitive to their language needs and cultural differences. Standards 8-14 provide critical guidance on how health care organizations can institutionalize practices and procedures to strengthen their ability to fully serve and effectively address the health needs of all their patients. Racial and ethnic minority patients have historically been subjected to biases assumed by providers and entrenched throughout the nation's health care system in medical decision-making and treatment. OMH has provided critical guidance on how health care organizations and providers can correct the current inequities that exist in the nation's health care system and better serve all of their patients. These standards are important to improving the nation's effectiveness in addressing racial/cultural biases, improving clinical outcomes, and closing the racial and ethnic health gap.

Nationally recognized standards of cultural and linguistic competence in health care service delivery are essential and long overdue. NMA applauds this effort. ❖

