



# What is health services research?

## Examining and Improving How the Healthcare System Works

### KEY POINTS

- Health services research (HSR) is the science of study that questions what works, for whom in what context, and at what cost within our health system.
- HSR plays an important role in the creation of evidence-based healthcare policy
- AHRQ and PCORI are two entities generating high-impact HSR that has saved the US billions of dollars
- The HSR field focuses on important and timely topics including health care costs, quality, access, equity, and safety.

Health services research (HSR) studies how health care is structured and provided to patients in order to make it more affordable, equitable, safe and effective. This field focuses on how individual, social and structural factors impact the quality, cost and outcomes of health care. Using health services research, we can better understand and improve care received in our health systems. Unlike other sectors of research that may focus on development of clinical treatments, HSR, for instance, focuses on how these interventions impact health outcomes. By translating scientific and medical innovations to better inform health care, health services research translates *cures* into *care*.

Health services research often includes patients, clinicians, policymakers, and other sectors to create multidisciplinary teams that address important healthcare questions. The field works to improve health care delivery, advocate for innovative data analysis, redesign payments for health care, and build healthy communities.

Plainly, health services research asks the questions **what works, for whom in what context, and at what cost?**

### A field saving lives and dollars

During its 80-year history, the field has moved evidence-based research into action by finding solutions to health care's toughest questions. This includes inquiries into whether medical interventions are safer and more cost-effective, such as in the Comprehensive Unit-Based Safety Program (CUSP) study that greatly reduced deadly line catheter infections with a simple checklist (see inset).

High impact studies highlight the importance of evidence-based healthcare that improves the health of patients and is mutually beneficial to health care systems. The RAND Health Insurance Experiment informed the creation of the Affordable Care Act and the ten essential services included in the legislation. Moreover, the Oregon Health Insurance Experiment found that providing Medicaid to those in need of health insurance greatly increases self-reported health and wellbeing while reducing financial stress.

The only federal department dedicated to researching health care delivery, the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), is a leading force in improving safety and quality. By creating strategic guidance and health care tools, AHRQ research has saved health care systems over \$12 billion. AHRQ extends these successes by working to put an end to medical errors, antibiotic resistance, and improving the health of disadvantaged populations.



In 2003, with \$8.6 million in funding from AHRQ, Dr. Peter Pronovost launched a study in Michigan hospitals to reduce catheter-related bloodstream infections in the ICU known as the Comprehensive Unit-Based Safety Program (CUSP).

Hospital-acquired catheter-related bloodstream infections impact approximately 80,000 people a year and treatment can cost nearly \$20,000 per patient. By distilling CDC guidance into a checklist of five main steps, Dr. Pronovost and his team reduced infection rates by two-thirds, saving over fifteen hundred lives in the first year.

This groundbreaking study led to the checklist's implementation not only across the country, but worldwide. In the US alone, this simple change has decreased infection rates by almost 50% and saves nearly \$2.3 billion each year.

With funding from the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI), researchers are looking at populations considered high-need, high cost. How do only 5 percent of patients account for 50 percent of the nation's health care cost? Health services researchers are using advanced techniques to predict who will need care before the costs get too high.

### Investing in HSR Will Improve Quality & Safety

Investments in health services research will help simplify the research process to get answers quicker regarding the multitude of disparities observed in care.

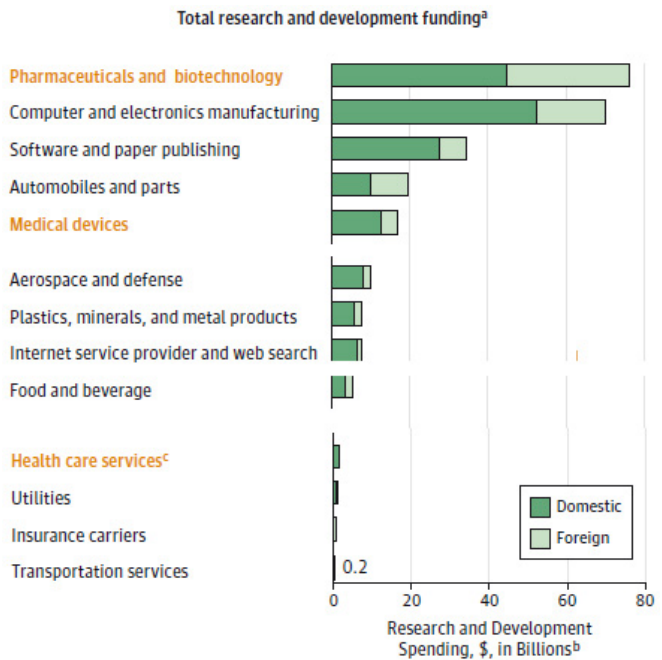
### Only 0.03 percent of federal health care spending goes to support health services research. The field needs continued investment to give patients, clinicians, and policymakers the information they need, when they need it.

Other federal science agencies investigate the sources and causes of disease, research and develop treatments and interventions to treat illness, and evaluate the safety, pricing, and production of those treatments to patients who need them. But only health services research brings those threads together to ensure that the health care system is structured to translate health discoveries into to health care.

With the right data, the field can address many of the topics troubling the U.S. health care system.

### Pressing topics, include:

1. Addressing the social determinants of health
2. Clinical workforce burden and burnout
3. Transforming private and public insurance models
4. Engaging patients in their care
5. Monitoring high-use patients
6. Preparing for our aging population
7. Instituting telehealth and telemedicine



Compared to other Sectors, HSR is Not Adequately Funded

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