



Better for Patients, Better for Health Care Team Members

Perceptions of Practicing in an ACO

The American Heart Association conducted 15 confidential interviews with various health care team members practicing in Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs) across the country. These ACOs, which hold providers accountable for both cost and quality of care, aim to improve patient experience and overall health while utilizing health care resources more efficiently. The interviews included perspectives from primary care physicians, a specialty physician, an advanced practice provider, nurse care managers, community health workers, social workers and a pharmacist. The ACOs represented varied in size, capabilities, services and populations, with participation in Original Medicare, Medicare Advantage, Medicaid and commercial contracts. Despite differences in the size and services of the ACOs, common themes and goals emerged. Collectively, the interviewed health care team members brought over 250 years of experience, including more than 80 years in ACO models.



Improved Patient Care

Health care team members unanimously felt that patients, particularly those with multiple health conditions, receive better care in ACOs. They attributed this improvement to the ACO model's holistic approach, which addresses not only physical and mental health, but also social and non-medical drivers of health. By considering factors like access to nutritious food, housing stability and transportation, ACOs provide comprehensive care that sets the model apart from traditional fee for service, ensuring patients receive the time, attention and resources that lead to notably better health outcomes.

"The impact of the ACO on quality of care has been phenomenal, exponential. I don't know how we existed before. I would not be [the] physician I am without it."

— Primary Care Physician



Collaborative Health Care Teams

Team members emphasized that ACOs foster strong collaboration among health care professionals, improving outcomes for both patients and providers. This team-based and multidisciplinary approach brings together various experts to provide patients—

especially those with complex health needs—with comprehensive, personalized care. Participants agreed that this approach empowers efficient teamwork and ensures that patients receive the attention they need without overburdening physicians and advanced practice providers.

"Patients in an ACO get better care because there is an interdisciplinary team working together to help ensure patients get what they need."

— Community Health Worker



Regular Source of Care

A key theme from the interviews was that ACOs facilitate a regular source of care, typically from a primary care physician or advanced practice provider, such as a nurse practitioner or physician assistant. Participants emphasized that these ongoing relationships play a crucial role in promoting patient engagement and ensuring continuity of care, especially for those with complex needs.



Better for Patients, Better for Health Care Team Members

Perceptions of Practicing in an ACO



Greater Patient Engagement

Health care professionals agree that ACOs improve patient involvement in their own care. By focusing on open communication, building trust and understanding patients' individual needs, ACOs were seen as particularly effective in helping patients—especially those who previously struggled with access—make informed decisions about their health.

“You have to tailor the communication to their needs whether that means driving around looking for an unhoused patient, using text messaging when preferred, using the telephone for the elderly or home visits, etc. Also finding ways to help dementia patients remember things. We try to meet the patients where they are.”

— Community Health Worker



Enhanced Use of Technology and Data

Team members noted that ACOs effectively use data and technology to better identify patients in need of additional care. This technological support also makes it easier to track performance, ensure patients receive necessary services and offer virtual care options, which improve overall care quality and accessibility.



Sustainable and Fulfilling Practice

All the health care providers interviewed expressed that ACOs offer a more sustainable and rewarding practice environment than traditional fee for service. They felt that the ACO model allows them to provide continuous, comprehensive care rather than just addressing immediate problems, leading to better patient outcomes and less provider burnout.

“In fee for service, the patients came in, we provided services and they would leave. The ACO provides wrap-around services. The nurse, social worker and pharmacist have eyes on them at all points over their health care journey. There are more eyes on patients to ensure they have a resource to help navigate.”

— Pharmacist



Better Work Environment for Providers

Health care providers reported that working in an ACO created a more positive work environment. They felt that the collaborative approach allows them to perform their jobs more effectively by sharing the workload across a team of professionals, ultimately improving patient care and leading to greater job satisfaction.



More Efficient Care Delivery

Health care team members overwhelmingly agreed that ACOs enabled more efficient service use than traditional fee-for-service. They appreciated how ACOs emphasize preventive care and reduce unnecessary hospital visits and procedures, allowing them to focus on delivering more effective and sustainable patient care.