



November 9, 2012

Ms. Doris Lefkowitz
Reports Clearance Officer
Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality
via email to doris.lefkowitz@AHRQ.hhs.gov

Re: Agency Information Collection Activities: Proposed Collection; Comment Request (77 FR 55475)

Dear Ms. Lefkowitz:

OMB Watch welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality's (AHRQ) proposed information collection. As a nonprofit organization dedicated to open government, accountability, and citizen participation since 1983, OMB Watch has long worked for effective government information collection practices and ready access to consumer information.

OMB Watch shares AHRQ's concern with improving patient safety and agrees that a consumer reporting system could "realize untapped potential of health care consumers to provide important information about patient safety events."¹ OMB Watch supports the development of a prototype system and encourages AHRQ to apply the lessons learned from the proposed information collection, if approved, toward the development of a national reporting system.

OMB Watch offers the following comments on the proposed information collection:

1. The proposed information collection will inform consumers and improve patient safety; and
2. Information sharing would enhance the utility of the proposed information collection.

1. The Proposed Information Collection Would Inform Consumers and Improve Patient Safety

OMB Watch believes that the proposed information collection would have practical utility in advancing AHRQ's health care research and information dissemination functions. OMB Watch agrees that "data about the consumer-reported patient safety events will be useful to the health care providers ... in quality or performance improvement."² Therefore, OMB Watch encourages AHRQ to collect, analyze, and share the data with the health care providers.

¹ Notice.

² Supporting Statement A, p. 5.

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In addition, OMB Watch believes that even greater utility could be realized through additional uses of the data. Sharing the data with researchers, regulators, and the public would help to inform consumers and improve patient safety, as we explain below.

2. Information Sharing Would Enhance the Utility of the Proposed Information Collection

AHRQ should develop a plan to share the information proposed for collection. The agency's supporting statement addresses the confidentiality of the information³ but does not address the issues of information sharing or public access. We agree that the consumer reports will be "highly valuable, even if not fully generalizable."⁴ Therefore, we encourage AHRQ to explore ways to share the data with researchers, regulators, and the public.

Researchers: AHRQ should allow researchers outside the project team to analyze the data. Sharing the data with external researchers would enhance the utility of the information collected by facilitating more extensive research and additional analytic approaches. Researchers could then share their findings with health care providers, policymakers, and other researchers, who could apply the findings to improve patient safety. Researchers could also publicly report their findings, which would inform consumers about patient safety risks and trends. To protect confidentiality, AHRQ could provide full access only to qualified researchers who agree to keep the data secure, under a similar approach as the Qualified Entity Program conducted through the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.

Regulators: AHRQ should share reports with relevant regulatory and law enforcement authorities at the federal, state, and local levels when a consumer reports a possible violation of law or regulation. Sharing reports with regulators could enhance enforcement, which could ultimately strengthen patient safety.

Public: AHRQ should explore ways to provide public access to the data. Consumer reporting databases can be valuable tools for the public, as demonstrated by other agencies already experienced in them. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) have made non-confidential extracts of consumer reports accessible online in order to help the public make informed decisions. Disclosing consumer-reported data allows other consumers and their advocates to identify trends, avoid harmful products and services, and address problematic patterns. AHRQ should examine the feasibility of publicly disclosing non-confidential information about individual reports, as well as aggregate data.

³ Supporting Statement A, p. 6-7.

⁴ Supporting Statement A, p. 6.

AHRQ should consider the benefits of sharing the information collected, particularly if the prototype expands into a national system.

Conclusion

OMB Watch appreciates the opportunity to comment on AHRQ's proposed information collection. We hope you take our recommendations into consideration. If you have questions about our comments or want to discuss the issues further, please feel free to contact us.

Sincerely,



Sean Moulton
Director, Federal Information Policy
OMB Watch



Gavin R. Baker
Federal Information Policy Analyst
OMB Watch