Response to Letter Regarding Article, “Temporal Trends and Variation in Early Scheduled Follow-up After a Hospitalization for Heart Failure: Findings from Get With The Guidelines-Heart Failure”

We thank Dr Ezekowitz and McAlister for their interest in our work on early outpatient follow-up after a hospitalization for heart failure. The investigators raise an interesting question: what proportion of early follow-up appointments was planned to be with a familiar provider? A prior analysis from their group identified an association between provider continuity and improved outcomes after a hospitalization for heart failure in Canada. However, whether these findings extend to other settings, including the United States, are unknown. For example, in a prior analysis of Medicare beneficiaries hospitalized with heart failure, early follow-up with a physician from the index hospitalization was not associated with 30-day readmission rates.

The question posed by these authors raises a larger issue. What are the unintended consequences, or “off-target effects,” of early follow-up? Certainly, there are financial implications for increased clinic appointments after a heart failure hospitalization, though these are presumably offset by reduced hospitalizations. Could early follow-up also strain healthcare systems and lead to decreased access to care for some or increased fragmentation of care for heart failure patients? Evaluating these questions through observational research alone is challenging given the other changes simultaneously occurring in United States healthcare. For example, there is growing interest in alternative healthcare delivery models for patients with heart failure, including acute care clinics, that may also lead to fragmentation of care, and providers rarely operate as solo providers in heart failure care today. Instead, follow-up care can be performed through a multidisciplinary disease management team that may not be captured through physician billing codes. To evaluate this and other issues in chronic disease management, we strongly advocate for an improved evidence base through randomized trials of transitional care interventions. There are now multiple platforms in the United States which can embed large, pragmatic, clinical trials within healthcare delivery systems, including the National Institutes of Health Collaboratory and the National Patient-Centered Clinical Research Network (PCORnet), to fully evaluate transitional care interventions before widespread implementation.

Disclosures

The Get With The Guidelines–Heart Failure (GWTG-HF) program is provided by the American Heart Association. GWTG-HF has been funded in the past through support from Medtronic, GlaxoSmithKline, Ortho-McNeil, and the American Heart Association Pharmaceutical Roundtable. Dr DeVore reports the following disclosures: Research: American Heart Association (modest), Amgen (modest), Novartis (modest). Dr Eapen reports the following disclosures: Advisory Board: Novartis, Cytokineti; Honoria: Janssen. Dr Bhatt discloses the following relationships: Advisory Board: Cardax, Elsevier Practice Update Cardiology, Medscape Cardiology, Regado Biosciences; Board of Directors: Boston VA Research Institute, Society of Cardiovascular Patient Care; Chair: American Heart Association Get With The Guidelines Steering Committee; Data Monitoring Committees: Duke Clinical Research Institute, Harvard Clinical Research Institute, Mayo Clinic, Population Health Research Institute; Honoria: American College of Cardiology (Senior Associate Editor, Clinical Trials andNews, ACC.org), Belvoir Publications (Editor in Chief, Harvard Heart Letter), Duke Clinical Research Institute (clinical trial steering committees), Harvard Clinical Research Institute (clinical trial steering committee), HMP Communications (Editor in Chief, Journal of Invasive Cardiology), Journal of the American College of Cardiology (Associate Editor), Population Health Research Institute (clinical trial steering committee), Slack Publications (Chief Medical Editor, Cardiology Today’s Intervention), WebMD (CME steering committees); Other: Clinical Cardiology (Deputy Editor); Research Funding: Amarin, AstraZeneca, Biotronik, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Eisai, Ethicon, Forest Laboratories, Ischemix, Medtronic, Pfizer, Roche, Sanofi Aventis, St Jude Medical, The Medicines Company; Trustee: American College of Cardiology; Unfunded Research: FlowCo, PLx Pharma, Takeda. Dr Fonarow reports the following disclosures: Research AHRQ (significant), NIH (significant), Consultant: Amgen (modest), Bayer (modest), Gambio (modest), Novartis (significant), Medtronic (modest). Dr Hernandez reports the following disclosures: American Heart Association (significant); Amgen (modest), NHLBI (significant), and Novartis (modest). The other authors report no conflicts.

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_Circ Heart Fail._ 2016;9:
doi: 10.1161/CIRCHEARTFAILURE.116.003134

_Circulation: Heart Failure_ is published by the American Heart Association, 7272 Greenville Avenue, Dallas, TX 75231
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Print ISSN: 1941-3289. Online ISSN: 1941-3297

The online version of this article, along with updated information and services, is located on the World Wide Web at:
http://circheartfailure.ahajournals.org/content/9/6/e003134

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