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Progress Report on Tobacco Control in Non-Profit HMOs

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Background: The US Public Health Service report, *Treating Tobacco Use and Dependence: A Clinical Practice Guideline*, calls for clinicians and health care delivery systems to identify, document, and treat every tobacco user seen in a health care setting. The process is described by the 5 A's (Ask about smoking, Advise smokers to quit, Assess willingness to try, Assist with treatment, and Arrange follow-up).

Methods: To assess tobacco control activities in 11 well-established, non-profit HMOs, we surveyed plans twice, once in 1999-2000 and again in 2000-2001. An independent interviewer collected data from multiple key informants at each health plan.

Results: The surveys revealed these HIT Project HMOs provide substantial central support for tobacco control. All have written clinical guidelines, nearly all designate tobacco control as a priority area, have a tobacco task force, a tobacco coordinator, and a distinct budget for tobacco control efforts. In keeping with the national guideline, all the HIT Project HMOs recommend that their clinicians ask patients about tobacco use and advise smokers to quit. Health plan benefits include comprehensive coverage for tobacco-related pharmacotherapy (8/10 cover at least one nicotine replacement product and 9/10 bupropion) and behavioral therapies. The surveys also highlighted areas for improvement including the ability to systematically identify smokers and the need to increase provider delivery and member utilization of available tobacco services.

Conclusions: The plans are doing well on the first two A's, but have a ways to go on the last three. Tobacco remains the most important cause of preventable disease and death in the United States. These HMOs provide medical care to more than 87 million individuals, including 30% minority enrollment. Full implementation of the national guideline in these health plans will make a significant contribution to national tobacco control.