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# FEHB Program Carrier Letter

## All Carriers

U.S. Office of Personnel Management  
Office of Insurance Programs

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**Letter No. 2000-38**

**Date:** July 28, 2000

Fee-for-service [ 32 ]    Experience-rated HMO [ 34 ]    Community-rated HMO[ 35 ]

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**SUBJECT:** Five Steps to Safer Health Care

I am pleased to present to you five steps and action items for enhancing patient safety. Please incorporate them into your consumer information and educational materials whenever possible.

We have been focusing on developing a frequent and consistent message to inform consumers of ways they can reduce the potential for error in their healthcare. With the collaboration of a diverse group of private and public stakeholders, including the Department of Labor's Health Benefits Education Campaign partners, we developed these steps to educate and actively involve individuals in their healthcare. The steps are evidence-based and were tested with Medicare beneficiary focus groups.

Today, the Quality Interagency Coordination (QuIC) Task Force formally endorsed these steps and encouraged their use by all participating federal agencies. Private employers who are advocating the use of these tips in their consumer literature include the National Business Coalition on Health, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, General Motors, and the Employer Health Care Alliance Cooperative just to name a few.

I believe a frequent and consistent message will have a major impact in raising consumer awareness. Federal agencies and large employers have committed to promoting these steps. I encourage you to do the same for all of your lines of business.

I also encourage you to share the Five Steps with your colleagues and others in the health care industry. If you have any questions about this letter, please call Dean Schleicher at (202) 606-0745, or email him at [ndschlei@opm.gov](mailto:ndschlei@opm.gov).

Sincerely,



Frank D. Titus  
Assistant Director  
for Insurance Programs

Enclosure

## Five Steps to Safer Health Care

1. **Speak up if you have questions or concerns.** Choose a doctor who you feel comfortable talking to about your health and treatment. Take a relative or friend with you if this will help you ask questions and understand the answers. It's okay to ask questions and to expect answers you can understand.
2. **Keep a list of all the medicines you take.** Tell your doctor and pharmacist about the medicines that you take, including over-the-counter medicines such as aspirin, ibuprofen, and dietary supplements like vitamins and herbals. Tell them about any drug allergies you have. Ask the pharmacist about side effects and what foods or other things to avoid while taking the medicine. When you get your medicine, read the label, including warnings. Make sure it is what your doctor ordered, and you know how to use it. If the medicine looks different than you expected, ask the pharmacist about it.
3. **Make sure you get the results of any test or procedure.** Ask your doctor or nurse when and how you will get the results of tests or procedures. If you do not get them when expected -- in person, on the phone, or in the mail -- don't assume the results are fine. Call your doctor and ask for them. Ask what the results mean for your care.
4. **Talk with your doctor and health care team about your options if you need hospital care.** If you have more than one hospital to choose from, ask your doctor which one has the best care and results for your condition. Hospitals do a good job of treating a wide range of problems. However, for some procedures (such as heart bypass surgery), research shows results often are better at hospitals doing a lot of these procedures. Also, before you leave the hospital, be sure to ask about follow-up care, and be sure you understand the instructions.
5. **Make sure you understand what will happen if you need surgery.** Ask your doctor and surgeon: Who will take charge of my care while I'm in the hospital? Exactly what will you be doing? How long will it take? What will happen after the surgery? How can I expect to feel during recovery? Tell the surgeon, anesthesiologist, and nurses if you have allergies or have ever had a bad reaction to anesthesia. Make sure you, your doctor, and your surgeon all agree on exactly what will be done during the operation.