The Impact of the Affordable Care Act on Physicians and Their Practices: An on-going study tracking attitudes and experiences of US physicians
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Most physicians reported a minimal impact on their practice as a result of the ACA from 3Q13 to 1Q14
- 60% of physician reported no change
- 10% of physician reported a positive impact

Since passage of the ACA, physician attitudes and experiences – while critical to the success of the ACA – have often been overlooked. With the introduction of the Health Insurance Marketplace in October 2013, bioStrategies Group, a Chicago-based independent consulting firm specializing in healthcare, initiated an ongoing study to monitor physician attitudes and experience with the ACA.

The purpose of the study is to understand how the ACA is impacting physicians and their practices now and into the future. The study also tracks physician attitudes towards the ACA.

Methods
Throughout the current study timeframe (3Q14 – 1Q14), 446 US physicians from 16 different specialties (ranging from a neurological sub-specialty to primary care) participated in a five question attitudinal survey. Responses were analyzed quarterly, tracking the distribution across a 5-point visual analog scale. To smooth out any impact from variation due to the mix of specialties sampled in any one quarter, results reported for each quarter are the moving average of three quarters. Respondents were also given the option to provide comments following each question.

Key Findings
The results reported herein span 3Q13 to 1Q14, corresponding to the roll out period of the Health Insurance Marketplace. Overall, throughout the roll out period, physician experiences and attitudes surrounding the ACA have generally remained the same (Fig 1a). While there was a non-statistically significant trend toward more negative experiences, about 60% of physicians consistently said the ACA has not impacted their practice or local healthcare community. In each quarter, between 8-10% of physicians said the ACA has

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When considering specific attributes of physician experience, including patient access to care, practice efficiency, quality of care, and cost to patient (Fig 1b-1e), throughout all three quarters about 50% or more of physicians cited no impact from the ACA. Patient access to affordable healthcare (Fig 1b) received the highest proportion of positive and the lowest proportion of negative responses. Impact on practice efficiency (Fig 1c) received the highest proportion of negative responses.

In volunteered comments about physician experience (Fig 2), physicians most frequently remarked that they have not experienced any significant impact as a result of the ACA and are uncertain how it may impact their practice in the future. Physicians also said they have observed increased patient cost and increased administrative burden as a result of the ACA. The most commonly cited explanations for the negative impact on practice efficiency were the result of new documentation requirements and required conversion to the electronic medical record systems.

Physician attitude towards the ACA was also surveyed. Throughout the study timeframe, physician attitudes towards the ACA remained divided (Fig 2): 24-26% of physicians said they would prefer to stay with the current ACA system; slightly less than half of physicians surveyed said they would like to go back to the pre-ACA system; and the remaining physicians (24-31%, not statistically different) said they would prefer to move toward a single payer system ("Medicare for all").

Physician volunteered comments about attitudes (Fig 4) further illustrated their divided opinions regarding the ACA. While a portion of physicians expressed a desire to move towards a single payer system and equal portion commented on the success of the Pre-ACA healthcare system. Furthermore, a large portion of physicians said they support healthcare reform, but not necessarily the ACA.
Conclusion: Throughout the Health Insurance Marketplace rollout period, physicians report little to no impact of the ACA on their practice and local healthcare community. Physician attitudes surrounding the ACA and direction of the US healthcare were divided. This ongoing study will continue to track the attitudes and experiences of US physicians as the ACA matures and its impacts are more fully realized by physicians and patients.

“I have seen many primary care physicians retire over the last 6 months: greater than I have seen over the last 2 years. I worry that many physicians will decline to accept ACA based insurance—US Pulmonologist, 4Q13

“I wish we had implemented the ACA first with children, then young adults, then middle age adults, in the attempt to increase the number of low utilizers into the market early—US Rheumatologist, 1Q14

“Single payer with a proven track record such as Medicare would be the best system.–US Rheumatologist, 1Q14

“Healthcare needed to be fixed. [The ACA] is a good place to start but not to end with...”—US Neurologist, 1Q14

Figure 4. Analysis of Open Field Comments and Physician Testimonials for Physician Attitudes 3Q13 to 1Q14 Physician open field comments analyzed, where the relative size of word or phrase represents the frequency of each compared to other words or phrases in the diagram.