

Healthcare's Humpty Dumpty Challenge: Specialization in the Era of Accountable Care

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Over the past several decades, the American healthcare system has become increasingly specialized. This trend is well-established at the level of individual physicians, where generalists have been replaced by specialists and specialists by sub-specialists. In recent years, specialization is also increasing at the level of delivery organizations, with the work of many general hospitals moving to specialty hospitals, ambulatory care centers, and companies focused on the management of specific chronic conditions, such as diabetes and congestive heart failure. Proponents of this shift toward specialization at both the individual and organizational level tout the benefits of reduced complexity, greater standardization, and heightened expertise that it affords.

Concurrent with this shift toward specialization, the federal health reforms contained in the Affordable Care Act (ACA) of 2010 contain provisions that emphasize the need for a high degree of coordination, integration, and provider accountability in the care of specific patients. The simultaneous push for specialization—which many fear may lead to more fragmented care delivery—and coordination will require clinicians, managers, and policymakers take a closer look at the relative costs and benefits of each trend for the American healthcare system. This session will consider how this tension between specialization and coordination can be managed to improve quality and control cost growth in healthcare delivery.