NATIONAL QUALITY FORUM

FAQs

Risk-adjustment of Measures for Socioeconomic Status (SES) Trial Period

What is risk-adjustment?

Risk adjustment is a statistical approach that allows patient-related factors (e.g., comorbidity and illness severity) to be taken into account when computing performance measure scores. Because patient-related factors can have important influence on patient outcomes, risk adjustment can improve the ability to make accurate and fair conclusions about the quality of care patients receive.

What is NQF's SES trial period?

NQF is conducting a two year trial of a temporary policy change that will allow risk-adjustment of performance measures for SES and other demographic factors. At the conclusion of the trial, NQF will determine whether to make this policy change permanent.

What prompted the SES trial period?

Previous NQF policy prohibited the inclusion of SES factors in risk-adjustment models out of concern that doing so might conceal inequalities in care and result in lower standards of provider performance. The Centers of Medicare and Medicaid Services contracted with NQF to examine this policy and the broader issue of SES risk adjustment. In 2014, an NQF convened multistakeholder panel of experts in healthcare performance measurement and disparities conducted this review. After its deliberations, the Expert Panel recommended that NQF should allow inclusion of SES factors in risk-adjusted performance measure scores when conceptual reasons and empirical evidence demonstrate it is appropriate. The NQF Board of Directors reviewed the Expert Panel's recommendations and decided to temporarily change NQF's policy and evaluate its impact during the course of a two-year trial period.

What is a conceptual relationship? What factors are necessary for a committee to consider SES adjustment?

A conceptual relationship refers to a logical theory or rationale that explains the association between an SES factor(s) and the outcome of interest. The conceptual basis may be informed by prior research and/or healthcare experience related to the measure focus, but a direct causal relationship is not required. An assessment of a conceptual relationship between an SES factor and a measure focus of interest includes a consideration of whether the effect of the SES factor is primarily mediated by the quality of care delivered (i.e., does the SES factor lead to the delivery of inferior care processes, which in turn affects the outcome?). If a conceptual relationship exists between a socioeconomic factor and the measure focus (e.g., cost and resource use), then empirical testing should be conducted to confirm that relationship. The analyses should include the details of the final risk adjustment model.

Which measures could be affected?

Starting in April 2015, any new measures submitted for possible endorsement or any endorsed measures that are undergoing maintenance can be included in the SES trial. For these measures, measure developers are requested to provide information on sociodemographic factors that were available and analyzed during measure development. The trial period also encompasses measures

endorsed with the condition that they enter the trial period, including three cost measures and 15 readmission measures. If a performance measure is SES-adjusted, the measure developer must also include specifications for stratification of a non SES-adjusted version of the measure.

Who will review the measures for the potential need for SES adjustment?

NQF Standing Committees will examine each measure submitted to their project to determine if they agree with the risk-adjustment approach used by a measure developer when considering NQF endorsement. Committees will designate measures for risk adjustment based on whether both a conceptual relationship and empirical rationale exists, indicating that SES adjustment is appropriate.

How will measures be evaluated during the trial period?

NQF's previous policy considered only clinical factors (e.g., comorbidity and illness severity) in risk adjusting a measure. With the restriction against SES adjustment lifted for this trial period, Standing Committees and other stakeholders will be able to raise questions about SES risk factors in their evaluation of performance measures submitted to NQF for initial or continued endorsement. These questions can also serve as the basis for an ad hoc review. Where there is a potential conceptual and empirical basis for SES adjustment, the Standing Committee will evaluate whether the developer assessed SES factors according to the guidelines for selecting risk factors recognized by the NQF Expert Panel. If both a conceptual relationship and an empirical rationale exist to adjust a measure for SES, the measure may be included in the trial.

What about previously endorsed measures not undergoing maintenance review?

A potential need for risk-adjustment for SES status can serve as the basis for an ad hoc review. During the trial period, previously endorsed measures that have been recommended for consideration under the SES policy will be evaluated by the relevant Standing Committee using NQF's ad hoc measure review process. Developers will be asked to submit a revised testing attachment in order to provide additional information on the conceptual and empirical relationship of the risk-adjustment variables to the measure focus. In the ad hoc review, Standing Committees will evaluate measures based on the additional information provided by the developer and on the SES Expert Panel Guidance.

Can lack of SES adjustment affect the decision regarding endorsement?

Yes. If a Standing Committee determines that risk-adjustment for SES factors is both conceptually and empirically appropriate for a particular measure, lack of that adjustment can be grounds for not recommending the measure for endorsement. This applies to both new and previously-endorsed measures evaluated in regular projects as well as to measures considered through the ad hoc evaluation process.

How will NQF evaluate success of the trial period?

NQF is committed to making the processes and outcomes of the trial period transparent to all stakeholders throughout the duration of the trial period. The primary focus of evaluation during the trial period is to ensure that NQF structures and processes support committees and stakeholders in identifying performance measures that should and should not be adjusted for SES. This will include descriptive information about the trial period, evaluation of relevant NQF structures and processes, and qualitative feedback from measure developers, Standing Committee members, NQF members, and members of the public.