Economic Consequences of Malnutrition

Longer Hospital Stays and Increased Burden on Resources

In today’s cost-conscious health care environment, appropriate use of health care resources is an imperative. Disease-related malnutrition is the enemy of these cost-conscious efforts.

With malnutrition rates in the range of up to 50 percent in hospital patients in Latin America, it is obvious that the economic consequences of this problem are profound.
Disease-Related Malnutrition Leads to Increased Health Care Resources

Malnourished patients tend to require longer hospitalization than well-nourished ones. Several studies have reported that disease-related malnutrition prolongs the hospital stay by an average of three days. In Latin America, studies have shown that malnourished patients stay on average five days longer in the hospital than well-nourished patients. In particular, a strong relationship has been established between nutritional status, clinical outcome, and length of stay amongst internal medicine patients or patients with gastric cancer.

Disease-related malnutrition also increases readmission rates. As a result, malnutrition is associated with increased use of hospital resources. Typically, longer stays result in higher treatment costs. Additional costs are generated when patients return to the hospital for further treatment.
Overall, disease-related malnutrition can increase hospital costs by 30 to 70 percent. In the UK, the public expenditure on disease-related malnutrition in 2007 was estimated to exceed USD 20 billion (€13 billion), corresponding to more than 10 percent of the total expenditure on health and social care. Based on this health economic evidence, the estimated costs of disease-related malnutrition in Europe were calculated to be USD 212 billion (€170 billion).

Putting these costs into perspective, the economic burden of disease-related malnutrition is estimated to exceed the costs of treating overweight and obese patients by two-fold. In comparison, the annual economic costs of obesity are estimated at USD five to six billion (€3.3 to 3.7 billion); if the estimate includes obesity plus overweight (USD 10 to 12 billion [€6.6 to 7.4 billion]), the figure is still only approximately half the cost of disease-related malnutrition.

* Calculated based on an exchange rate of 1.5674 (Source: Bloomberg 11/25/12)

** Calculated based on an exchange rate of 1.2462 (Source: Bloomberg 12/14/14)

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