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Health Section Actuaries at 2017 AcademyHealth Meeting

By Margie Rosenberg

The Society of Actuaries (SOA) Health Section sponsored a half-table at the annual research meeting for AcademyHealth held in New Orleans from June 24–27. AcademyHealth (<http://www.academyhealth.org>) “works to improve health and the performance of the health system by supporting the production and use of evidence to inform policy and practice.” The purpose of this article is to summarize the meeting and the SOA participation at the meeting, and to conclude with my main takeaways for future interaction.

The AcademyHealth meeting was well attended, with more than 2,500 participants from the United States and abroad. Those who attended represented a wide array of disciplines, including health economists, health services researchers and providers who work in academics, industry or policy or trade organizations. The meeting was set up similarly to SOA meetings with oral presentations by researchers and panel discussions with experts.

Both the opening plenary on Sunday and the luncheon plenary on Monday illustrated the goals of AcademyHealth to educate stakeholders and to inform decision-making and policy with separate panels of discussants representing different perspectives. The opening plenary was entitled “Health Policy After the Election: What Can We Expect? What Will Be the Role of Evidence?” and the luncheon plenary was entitled “Responding to Crises: The Role of Resiliency in Community and Health Care Systems.” The entire list of sessions can be found at <https://academyhealth.confex.com/academyhealth/2017arm/meetingapp.cgi/Home/0>.

Austin Frakt, Ph.D., and Aaron Carroll, M.D., M.S., of The Incidental Economist blog attended the meeting. A link to some of their blog quotes were published at <http://www.academyhealth.org/about/people/incidental-economist>.

The Academy Research meeting featured exhibit booths of various organizations, like the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, or by universities targeting Ph.D. students or hires. Rebecca

Owen, SOA Health Research actuary, spearheaded the idea of having a booth at AcademyHealth to showcase the research of health actuaries and to inform a different, but similarly focused, audience of the knowledge that actuaries have in the health space. The exhibit table displayed reports of sponsored research, as well as some white papers produced by industry actuaries. A flash drive was provided that contained all the health research obtainable from the SOA website in an easy-to-access place. Rebecca and I were able to share actuaries’ perspectives with conference attendees.

However, more similar to clinical meetings, AcademyHealth featured many posters of projects. Instead of presenting their work as part of an oral session, vast arrays of posters summarizing the work of the researchers were featured, with at least one of the co-authors standing by the poster to interact with individuals to share their research on a more-intimate basis. Here the participants benefited from the interactive conversation by exploring more of the research in detail, as well as getting answers to questions in a comfortable environment. The authors gained through the sharing process and potentially received advice on ways to improve their work.

As a prelude to the main research meeting, other events took place such as “Interest Groups” (similar to the SOA’s sections), where participants had a one-day (or half-day) conference on a particular theme. The one-day themes included State Health Research and Policy, Child Health Services Research, and Public Health Systems Research. Half-day themes included Disparities, Health Economics, Health Workforce, Long Term Services and Supports, Quality and Value, Surgical and Perioperative Care, Translation and Communications, Behavioral Health Services Research, Disability Research, Global Health and Health Care, Health Information Technology, Interdisciplinary Research Group on Nursing Issues, and Women and Gender Health. These themes were repeated during the main meeting in many sessions.

I, together with Kyeonghee Kim, a Ph.D. student at UW–Madison, presented a poster at the Health Economics Interest Group meeting. Our poster, shown as part of this article, was entitled “Identification of Persistent High Utilizers and the Role of Multiple Unhealthy Behaviors.” This work represents work in progress that is nearly ready for submission to a journal and is sponsored in part by a grant from the SOA as part of the Center of Actuarial Excellence program. For us, we were able to share our ideas with others who work in the area and then hear how others may have addressed similar challenges.

My takeaways are that actuaries would benefit from participating in the AcademyHealth meetings, and that participants at AcademyHealth would benefit from interacting with actuaries. While many of the talks and posters concerned the costs of health care,

many did not. Considerations of the impact of different policy or operational decisions without considering costs are not sustainable. In my opinion, any impact of an intervention on the cost of insurance is best discussed by actuaries.

Having a presence by the SOA at the AcademyHealth meeting was beneficial to help establish relationships with others who work in similar, complementary areas. I am hopeful that this

presence will be continued and further partnerships explored with the AcademyHealth staff. ■



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