

Highlights of [GAO-06-710](#), a report to congressional requesters

MEDICARE PART D

Prescription Drug Plan Sponsor Call Center Responses Were Prompt, but Not Consistently Accurate and Complete

Why GAO Did This Study

The Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act of 2003 (MMA) established a voluntary outpatient prescription drug benefit, known as Medicare Part D. Private sponsors have contracted with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) to provide this benefit and are offering over 1,400 stand-alone prescription drug plans (PDP). Depending on where they live, beneficiaries typically have a choice of 40 to 50 PDPs, which vary in cost and coverage. MMA required each PDP sponsor to staff a toll-free call center, which serves as a key source of the information that beneficiaries need to make informed choices among PDPs. GAO examined (1) whether PDP sponsors provide prompt, courteous, and helpful service to Medicare beneficiaries and others and (2) the extent to which PDP sponsor call centers provide accurate and complete information to Medicare beneficiaries and other callers.

To address these objectives, we made 900 calls to 10 of the largest PDP sponsor call centers during March 2006, posing one of five questions about their Part D plans during each call. We tracked the amount of time it took to reach a customer service representative (CSR), the number of calls that did not reach a CSR, and the appropriateness and clarity of CSRs' language. We developed criteria for determining accurate and complete responses based on CMS information.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-710.

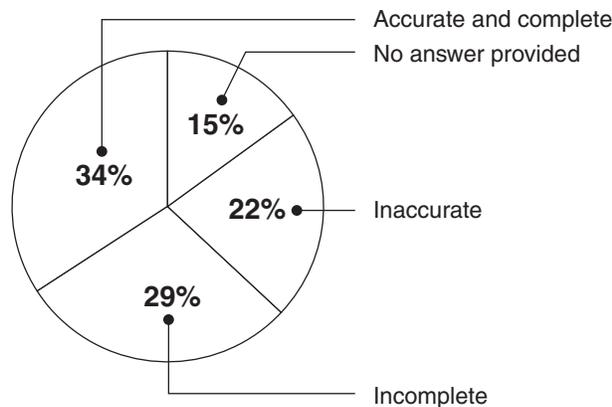
To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Leslie G. Aronovitz at (312) 220-7600.

What GAO Found

Call center service was generally prompt and courteous, and many CSRs offered helpful suggestions and information. GAO reached a representative in less than 1 minute for 46 percent of the calls CSRs fielded and in less than 5 minutes for 96 percent of the calls fielded. While GAO did not reach CSRs for 4 percent of the calls it placed, mainly because of disconnections, GAO found that 98 percent of CSRs with whom GAO spoke were easy to understand, polite, and professional. In addition, many CSRs provided helpful suggestions related to GAO's questions, such as details about a mail-order option to obtain drugs or lower-cost drugs.

However, CSRs at 10 of the largest PDP sponsor call centers did not consistently provide accurate and complete responses to GAO's five questions, which GAO developed using information from CMS and other sources. GAO obtained accurate and complete responses to about one-third of the 864 calls for which GAO reached a CSR. The overall accuracy and completeness rate for each call center ranged from 20 to 60 percent. CSRs were unable to answer 15 percent of the questions posed, primarily those related to plan costs. Furthermore, CSRs within the same call center sometimes provided inconsistent answers. For example, in response to questions about PDP cost comparisons for specified sets of drugs, CSRs at 3 call centers told GAO that it was against the sponsors' policies to identify any of their plans as lowest cost. However, other CSRs at each of these call centers did not cite this policy and did identify a plan as lowest cost.

Percentage of 864 Calls with Accurate and Complete, Incomplete, or Inaccurate Responses, and Those Where No Answer Was Provided, March 2006



Source: GAO.

In commenting on a draft of this report, CMS criticized the analysis as based on inaccurate, incomplete, and subjective methods that limit the report's relevance and validity. GAO maintains that its methods are sound and its findings are accurate. CMS officials told GAO at a May 2006 meeting that CSRs should have been able to accurately answer the questions GAO posed.