As someone who is both a general medicine doctor and a specialist in Headache and Integrative Medicine I have been very interested in how we as a society allocate medical resources on a daily basis. Both patients and doctors now have to navigate a complex world of insurance coverage, guidelines, protocols, and pharmacy benefit managers. In this setting exploring core values in the context of relationship based care between a patient and their physician becomes even more important.

We knew going in from the splendid work of one of our co-authors, Dr. Hurst, who showed in her work done in Europe 10 years ago that rationing does go on there and that there are interesting differences among several of the advanced European cultures in how they handle issues in this realm. So in designing our larger study we wanted to look at whether the same things are occurring here in America. To do this we embedded some of the same questions into our large physician survey. What we found was that these rationing behaviors in fact also occur here to about the same extent they do in Europe.

Rationing is such a controversial topic that many physicians don’t even feel safe talking about it openly or admitting that we all, to one extent or another, must participate in these discussions with our patients about wise resource utilization. As physicians our primary duty is to our patients one on one. But society also expects us to also function as agents of wisdom in helping to allocate resources wisely for the collective. Because the issue is so loaded here it is difficult to ask about directly. So we have used a set of validated questions that look at the question more indirectly and found that indeed does also take place here in the US.

The best thing, and something we personally all started experiencing at Mayo a few years back with the changes in insurance structure, is for doctors and patients to be lined up on the same side of the equation and working together to decide what is needed in an open and transparent discussion. As copays for things like MRI scans have gone up patients rightfully ask “do I really need that test” which gives them and their doctors the chance to discuss the pros and cons in detail and make a personalized decision with cost and value as components of the discussion that can be factored in in accordance with the patients priorities.

As an Integrative Medicine physician I am also starting to see another very encouraging set of trends around the country. People are beginning to take more responsibility for their own health and are reaching for higher levels of wellness and fitness through nutrition, exercise, and community. When everyone has a stake in the outcomes then the health of the population and quality of life improves.

We found in our work using an indirect but validated way to get at this loaded question shows that rationing does occur on a regular basis. When the system works well it is about working closely with each individual patient and family to figure out what is best for them at that particular time. Hence, there is great value of a working relationship with a physician who knows and cares about you. We hope that our work will be one step toward helping individual doctors and patients as well as society as a whole to have more forthright, open and non-adversarial discussions about this.