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Physicians' Career Satisfaction, Quality of Care and Patients' Trust

How Community Uninsurance Impacts Physicians

The number of people without health insurance coverage in the U.S. is large and growing. About 15.9 percent of the U.S. population (46.6 million) was uninsured in 2005 and the lack of health insurance is associated with limited health care access and poor health outcomes for lower income people. The value of uncompensated health care services provided to the U.S. uninsured population has been estimated at about \$35 billion. Research has shown that, the higher the local uninsurance rate, the more likely it is that the uninsured will report having difficulties accessing health care. More recent research has shown a less obvious result: that the relative size of the local population without health insurance coverage is also positively related to insured adults reporting that they had unmet medical needs.

A recent study by José A. Pagán and Lakshmi Balasubramanian from The University of Texas-Pan American and Mark V. Pauly from The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania linked an indicator of community uninsurance both with measures of physician satisfaction and quality, and with measures of patient trust among insured patients. Their study, published in the October 2007 issue of *Health Economics, Policy and Law*, found that physicians practicing medicine in communities with relatively large uninsured populations have lower career satisfaction and lower perceptions of the

quality of care because their local health care systems in general and their medical practices in particular are faced with financial difficulties that limit their ability to deliver high quality care. As a result, patients in high uninsurance communities would be less likely to trust that their physician is acting in their best interest when they provide them with health care services.

Data on 4,920 physicians from the 2000-2001 Community Tracking Study Physician Survey and from 25,637 adults from the 2003 Community Tracking Study Household Survey were used to analyze whether the relative size of the local uninsured population is associated with the level of career satisfaction and the quality of care provided by physicians and to assess whether patient trust is associated with the level of community uninsurance.

The results indicate that the higher the proportion of uninsured adults in a given community, the lower the likelihood that physicians would be satisfied with their careers. Community uninsurance was also negatively related to the likelihood that a physician believed that they could make clinical decisions in the best interest of their patients without seeing reductions in their income, as well as to the likelihood that a physician would agree with the statement that their level of communication with specialists was sufficient to ensure the



delivery of high quality care. The authors also found that community uninsurance was negatively related to whether patients trusted that their doctor would put their medical needs above all other considerations when treating their medical problems. Community uninsurance was also positively related to whether insured patients believed that their doctor was strongly influenced by health insurance company rules when making decisions about their medical care.

The results of this study are consistent with the premise that physicians practicing medicine in communities with relatively large uninsured populations have lower career satisfaction and, to some extent, a negative perception of their ability to make relevant clinical decisions related to the quality of care they provide. A possible explanation for this result is that the size of the local population without health insurance coverage exerts financial pressure on local health care systems and medical practices, thus, reducing the willingness or ability of physicians to deliver high quality care.

A corollary of this finding is that users of health care services in high uninsurance communities would be less likely to trust their physician and whether he/

she is acting in their best interest when providing medical care. This is important from a health policy perspective because patient trust has been linked to higher patient satisfaction with health care services, higher acceptance and adherence to therapy, better relationship with health care providers and a lower likelihood that patients report having unmet medical needs or health care delays.

IPHP Research Brief 08-02 is based on the article: Pagán, José A., Lakshmi Balasubramanian and Mark V. Pauly. (2007). "Physicians' Career Satisfaction, Quality of Care and Patients' Trust: The Role of Community Uninsurance," Health Economics, Policy and Law, 2(4), 347-362. The January 7, 2008 issue of American Medical News included a story based on this article (Seen from the extremes: Uninsureds' effect on medicine): <http://www.ama-assn.org/amednews/2008/01/07/gvsa0107.htm>.