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## Editorial: Health Insurance And Healthcare System Reform

May 22, 2007 - 3:43pm Lifestyle



### Why You Can't Have One without the Other

By Ronda Kotelchuck

With 22 percent of New York City residents uninsured, expanding health insurance coverage is without question an urgent matter. However, if our real objective is to ensure that New Yorkers get the kind of care they need when they need it, then the lack of health insurance coverage is only half of the problem. The other half of the problem is a costly but ineffective healthcare delivery system.

Universal coverage and the healthcare delivery system reform must go hand-in-hand. If not, then insured patients will have an insurance card but not know where to go but the emergency room for their basic care. Conversely, without insurance coverage, patients will not go to even the finest healthcare system in the world if financial barriers force them to choose between food, shelter and healthcare.

At the heart of the healthcare delivery system problem is the fact that many New York City communities still lack the least expensive, most frequently needed, and most basic of all health services—primary and preventive care. Without these, New Yorkers end up waiting until perfectly preventable or primary care-manageable conditions become major health crises, and then they are forced to rely on expensive emergency or inpatient care. The result is wasteful and inhumane, taking its toll in needless suffering, disability and death, not to mention soaring healthcare costs. This is a particularly critical problem in an era when the leading causes of illness and death, such as asthma, diabetes, heart disease and

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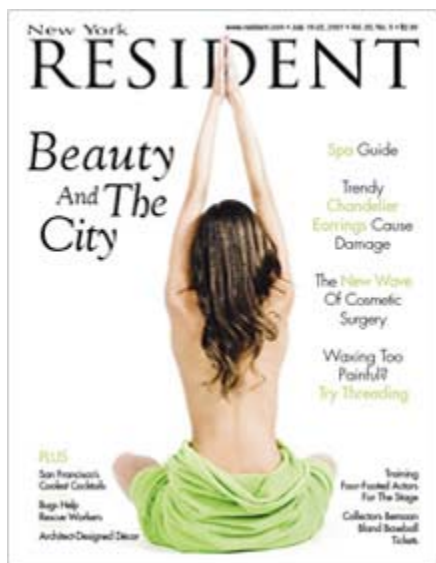


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cancer, can be largely prevented or managed through good primary care.

The problem is even more severe for low-income New Yorkers, who suffer disproportionately from chronic illness and the lack of primary and preventive care. A recent study conducted by the Primary Care Development Corporation and the NYC Health and Hospitals Corporation showed excessively high rates of avoidable emergency room and hospital use in low-income communities. Many such communities simply do not have enough physicians to meet their primary care needs. The study showed that more than half of New York City communities have a significant shortage of primary care physicians serving low-income residents. For example, although 3 percent of the city's residents are enrolled in Medicaid, they have access to just 25 percent of the primary care physicians based in the city. And the numbers are even worse for the uninsured.

Fortunately, many groups are organizing to address the problem. City Council Speaker Christine Quinn is promoting an initiative to build 10 new community health centers over the next five years in communities with the highest need, an initiative that is supported by Mayor Bloomberg. Primary care shortages would be far worse in the city without expansion efforts by the NYC Health and Hospitals Corporation, the Primary Care Development Corporation and community health centers, among others.

Led by IBM, employers—who are struggling to preserve health insurance for their employees in the face of soaring healthcare costs—have decided that the key solution is ensuring that every American has a “patient-centered medical care home.” Last week they came together for the first time with provider organizations to form a national collaborative for this purpose.

Here in New York, five statewide primary care organizations have joined together to catalyze support for New York City and state health policy that places primary and preventive care at the center of the healthcare system. They are the Primary Care Development Corporation, the Community Health Care Association of New York State, the New York State Area Health Education Centers System, the New York State Chapter of the American College of Physicians and the New York State Chapter of the Academy of Family Practitioners.

All of these efforts recognize one important reality: we separate universal coverage and healthcare delivery system reform at our own peril. Many employers and states have expanded coverage in the past, only to retreat in the face of uncontrollable healthcare costs. Without a robust primary and preventive care system—the “front-end” of the whole healthcare system—that can effectively prevent or manage the illnesses now so prevalent in

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our city, patients will not have good health outcomes, and we will continue to be helpless in the face of out-of-control healthcare costs. Pouring huge numbers of newly-covered patients into a system that does not offer the kind of care they need does not achieve our objective, which is healthy New Yorkers who have access to high-quality, affordable, and patient-centered healthcare.

Ronda Kotelchuck is the executive director of the Primary Care Development Corporation, a non-profit that advocates healthcare reform.

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