



Sierra Sacramento Valley Medicine
Vol. 60 / No. 1 - Jan / Feb 2009

Posit: Medical Care for Indigent Illegals?

"Indigents seeking medical care from the County of Sacramento should be required to show proof of citizenship."

Background:

On February 10, the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors held a hearing on the elimination or reduction of medical care services to indigents provided by the County. The Supervisors voted 3 to 2 to eliminate the services.

The \$4,060,000 in cuts includes the closure of two more clinics. It calls for determining citizenship before providing services and eliminating care for those who are not U.S. citizens.

The county estimates it will save \$2.4 million by denying services to the estimated 4,000 non-U.S. citizens who use the clinics. SSVMS has long spoken out against such cuts in service.

Results:

Of 149 replies, 45 agreed while 104 disagreed. Those who commented were largely in disagreement. Under present circumstances, this is a difficult issue confronting the Supervisors, and all legislators.

The posit is politically charged, of course. Therefore, it seems likely that some members, while agreeing, did not wish to say so.

While disagreeing with the first posit, others might have a harder time with this sequel posit: "A license to practice medicine in the USA, should require that all physicians treat all indigents, including 'illegal' aliens, without pay." That is consistent with our oath, and ethic, and with the position of most religions. But who pays for ideal action? Addressing this posit, as sent to members, most of us say to the taxpayer: "You must pay to treat all indigents; but pay me." Hippocrates, Osler, Maimonides: Help!

"I disagree mainly based on the fact that I although the "county" may lower its cost, the overall costs of care will increase. Not providing healthcare does not dissuade individuals from coming to the land of opportunity. Given the legal obligation to treat anyone requiring emergency treatment in an emergency department, I believe the costs of denying preventive care through the county will only mean higher overall costs for the region in general. It only shifts the cost rather than provide an actual solution to the problem. Rather than retract itself into a shell, the county should seek to form innovative partnerships that focus on this issue and strive to avoid expensive care rather than fostering the eventuality of medical catastrophes that don't serve the needs of the community or the individual.

Furthermore, the county's income is based on sales taxes and property taxes among other sources. Citizenship is not relevant with that kind of funding stream and discouraging immigrants from being here only diminishes tax revenues.

A more novel approach would be to partner with the federal government in establishing a work-permit "visa" that includes "taxes" for county of residence to cover healthcare needs.

Another alternative is to seek to partner with businesses that benefit from illegal immigrants -- they *do* work (and work hard) and do many jobs in support of our community. Partnering with businesses that benefit from their labor is another alternative." - **Mike Hogarth, MD**

"California is nearing bankruptcy. In good times we may be able to afford this service, but for now we have to cut back." - **Gregory Joy, MD**

"Physicians and other clinic employees are not, and cannot be, agents of the Department of Homeland Security. Their moral duty to provide health care, not to enforce immigration laws. "Safety net" health care is a public service, not a private good that can be withheld on the basis of immigration status. Should we also tell firefighters not to put out fires involving houses owned or occupied by non-citizens? Should we tell police not to investigate crimes affecting non-citizens? Should we tell paramedics not to bring patients to the hospital without proof of citizenship? Should we put fences and gates around our parks and libraries so that only citizens can use them? If public health can be sacrificed in this manner to save a few dollars, then surely we should sacrifice public safety and recreation for the same reason." - **Patrick S. Romano, MD, MPH**

"I disagree with denying services to those with no voice in our society, the most vulnerable. " - **Andrew D. Kincaid, MD**

"Passage of this restriction on indigent care will have a devastating effect of increased chronic morbidities and fatal outcomes, resulting in increase acute care visits to the already overburdened ERs and area hospitals, and raising healthcare costs to the Sacramento community." - **Colin P. Spears, MD**

"Reluctantly I disagree. In general, illegal aliens will avoid seeking medical care unless there is no other choice. As a result, most present to emergency rooms for care when a disease process is fairly far advanced. Many could have been taken care of easily if medical care had been available. The subsequent cost of caring for illegal aliens when they are very sick puts a significant burden on all health care systems and the cost proportionally higher than if a clinic had been available for them to go to for routine care" - **Sidney A. Scudder, MD**

"[Agreeing,] I also suggest this as a future posit: A prepaid health insurance policy [should] be required for foreign travelers in the USA" - **J. Dale Smith, MD**

"I believe that_our mission should be to serve our entire community and not just a select few. If this step is allowed, where does it end. " - **David R. Bradbury, MD**

"If saving money is the main concern where will this indigent population go for medical care, emergency rooms are a lot more costly than clinics. By trying to solve one problem you only create another. Instead of trying to cut off medical care to an already medically underserved population lets search for a more humane solution." - **Deepika Bindal**

"This is a difficult issue. It comes down to balancing tax payer liability with setting priorities. The tax payers in CA and Sacramento County are at the top of the scale for local and state taxes. If we have maxed out revenue, then American citizens need to be first in line for services" - **David J. Gibson, MD**

"The financial burden of illegal immigrant must be federal responsibility; that includes care and disposition including deportation if violating U.S. immigration law. Sorry, there's a Depression on!" - **Cleve B. Baker, MD**

"As a Spirit(County Volunteer) pediatrician who has seen many _of t he children and infants, I can testify that this is a foolish idea. I have seen many children and infants who if not treated in our clinics will end up in the emergency rooms and admitted because of severe complications of untreated infections like orbital cellulitis,pneumonia, severe asthma ,uncontrolled diabetes or uncontrolled seizures. While the economics of this neglect are _clear this great county should never forget that a child is a child is a child and sending a young mother home with a very sick child because she cannot document her citizenship is the greatest sin ." - **Diamond Kassam, MD**

"It is professionally, morally and ethically wrong to withhold needed medical care. Requiring proof of citizenship is cumbersome and a costly administrative burden which would deter care of citizens. This is a really bad idea." - **Richard K. Park, MD**

"The green card people working and paying tax as citizens, they should have the right for medical care as the indigent citizens." - **Bihai Peng, MD**

"If excluded from primary care, many will seek care in the ER at much greater cost. Due to EMTALA- they will all be seen and treated. It is not only the right thing to provide basic medical care, but the cheeper option." - **Eric G. Tepper, MD**

"What will be the cost if these patients end up in ED's getting care later? What about children who are here because of their parents? Should they get care? It's not their fault that they live here." - **Michael Haight, MD**

"All indigents should receive medical care, no matter their citizenship." - **Molly R. Kirkconnell**

"As an emergency physician, I fear the added patient load in the local emergency departments. Many of these undocumented patients will have minor medical conditions, requiring an investment of time by medical and nursing personnel who should be concentrating on true emergent and urgent conditions. The County of Sacramento is dumping their problem onto the private sector. The federal government also is shirking its responsibility" - **Norman Label, MD**

"I disagree.Denial of care will increase charity care at ER." - **Sunil P. Perera, MD**

"I don't agree. First this is a civil rights issue and poor is poor. Not treating diseases in the early states can meant hat they may get sicker and require more services. Anyone can go to an ER (without proof of citizenship)and get care usually much more expensive than the clinic level. " - **J. Thomas Wilkes, MD**

"I agree, assuming these are all non urgent/emergent encounters" - **Robert J. Forster, MD**

"No one should be denied medical care when they need it.Lets fix the problem not punish people when they are in need" - **Qasem M. Noori, MD**

"I assume this refers to persons seeking services at a County facility other than a hospital emergency room unless that ER is a designated county facility. My answer is based on Health Statutes which state that The "County" is ultimately responsible for the health of its citizens. If the address of documents show citizenship in in another County they should be sent to that County. However, should a report of a communicable disease accompany the patient then the patient should be treated for sanctity of public health." - **Stephen Mandaro, MD**

"A very difficult problem that would very adversely affect emergency rooms and hospitals. .Some cutbacks in the county budget may require this as a last resort as the county has limited resources. I am very ambivalent on this." - **Peter S. Carruth, MD**

"Obviously, if care is not offered in clinics, the same patient will seek care at emergency facilities and increase the overall cost of care. Why not require that before ER care, if presenting with a non emergent complaint, that the patient needs to be directed to a public healthcare facility instead. After all, we should seek to place the patient at the point of the lowest cost, and most appropriate setting for care and not eliminate the opportunity for low cost, efficient care." - **Richard A. Gould, MD**

"Sick people must receive care. To allow them to die on the street because they lack proper papers would be inhumane." - **Norman R. Eade, MD**

"I disagree: proof of citizenship should not be a criteria for indigent care in Sacramento." - **Monte E. Ikemire, MD**

"Legal resident not citizenship should be required to obtain service...this has been in vogue in Canada for 40 years and of course there are cheats all the time because in Canada a picture ID is not permitted." - **Michael H. Burman, MD**

"A realistic compromise would be to require payment which covers the cost of service, permitting the provision of care without further burdening taxpayers." - **Lee O. Welter, MD**

"I DISAGREE b/c i dont think funding should be cut for any sort of healthcare to our patient population. Those are the people we serve at the student run clinics and this could lead to a closure of the facilities we use on the weekends!" - **Lawrence Ei S. Lipana**

"It is important to bring medical care even to undocumented aliens for a number of reasons including many that can be considered public health emergencies such as tuberculosis, chronic salmonella carriage, STDs, etc... Further, this is the population that is most susceptible to severe ailments that if not caught early will end up costing the state and the country a lot of money to treat when they finally do show up for medical care." - **John Belko, MD**

"I do not agree that proof of citizenship should be required to obtain medical care." - **Janet Keremitsis, MD**

"If the Federal Government wishes to encourage and provide care for the non-citizens then it must provide funds for payment of services." - **James O. Farley, MD**

"Creates a layer of law enforcement not consistent with medical care. All indigents deserve medical care as determined by medical personnel." - **Charles H. Halsted, MD**

"Marvelous thinking. About time !!!!" - **M. Eugene Speicher, MD**

"This population is an asset to Sacramento economy. Not providing them with healthcare will simply inundate our ERs, wasting more of the healthcare dollars. In the long run it does not save sac county to deny healthcare to its inhabitants regarding US Citizenship status." - **Annahita K. Sarcon**

"Unless the patient has a communicable disease such as tuberculosis." - **Charlie Espy, IV, MD**

"I disagree, until there is a State/Fed plan to deal with the large numbers of indigent workers in this county and state, this does not sound like a good idea. Eliminating clinics will impact the ER's more the health care system at a far greater cost then 2.4 million. The limited preventive care offered in these clinics is better then nothing. " - **Jose J. Cueto, MD**

"Diseases such as TB are not restricted to citizens, and will increase the risk to the health of the public if not diagnosed and treated in legal noncitizen immigrants as well as illegal immigrants." - **David A. Herbert, MD**

"If we do not treat them at County Clinic, they will show up at ER, and we end up treating them any way. Can we turn them down if they show up at ER ?" - **Dennis A. Chu, MD**

"The county needs to find another way to balance its budget other than on the backs of the poor." - **Donna M. DeFreitas, MD**

"There should be more attempts to get volunteers to keep clinics open and we should be more helpful to non English speakers---not eliminat care. I heard there are more volunteers in these hard times than can be given jobs. I have offered to work in the county clinics since I'm a retired MD and have yet to be taken up on the offer." - **Elaine P. Silver, MD**

"[I disagree.] Please also address the County's proposed cuts of mental health services, including geriatric mental health services - these are also of importance to physicians." - **Esther E. Novak, MD**

"We as compassionate providers of medicine should see all patients regardless of country of origin. " - **Dineen J. Greer, MD**

"I strongly disagree. In matters of public health and obstetrics it endangers others who are either in our country or unborn. In emergencies, it is against our oath to reject patients. In routine but necessary medical care, it is just sad that we cannot be humanitarian enough to provide services. We all have Red Cross available to us, why do we shun provision of care to other indigents. I feel the immigration authorities and border guards should be the ones to do rejection, not healthcare workers.

If I were in another country and destitute for whatever circumstances...it would seem barbaric to me if I could not get needed medical care." - **Evalyn Horowitz, MD**

"Neglecting the indigent with the highest risk of having infectious diseases like Tuberculosis, Measles, etc... will lead to a resurgence of diseases in American citizens. Unfortunately, this will increase health care costs by pushing these patients into the already overburdened Emergency Rooms. Although, a resurgence may encourage some of those parents who refuse vaccinations to reconsider." - **Anthony W. Russell, MD MPH**

"If there is not enough funds to cover current residents ... then we can't also cover non-citizens." - **David G. Telander, MD**

"Citizenship is not criterion for deeming medical necessity. Further, the risks of NOT treating infectious conditions such as tuberculosis will impact all members of our society, citizens or not." - **Sage Wexner**

"Life threatening should be treated." - **John W. Young, MD**

"It is costly enough to care for our own citizens. Those who hire indigents should be required by law to pay for their medical care. We are generous people who find it difficult to turn away folks who need medical care, but many expect physicians and those who man the "free" clinics to pick up the tab. This is not a reasonable expense." - **Byron H. Demorest, MD**

"If they can't be seen as an outpatient they will seek more care from the ERs which is more costly. If the county wants to implement this measure the non-profit community clinics that can provide free care will have to step up their services and a large education effort will be needed to keep down the unnecessary ER visits. This may have to be done for all people in Sacramento county as the county may run out of money to do much care anyway." - **Katherine M. Gillogley, MD**

"Do you have to show proof of citizenship to receive urgent care from the police or fire departments?" - **Dennis L. Fung, MD**

"It is entirely unethical as well as impractical for the county to refuse medical care to people based upon their citizenship status. I refuse to believe that the United States of America will become so inhumane of a country that it turns its backs on those who are sick and in need of healthcare based upon their citizenship status." - **Dawn Sung**

"This will only increase the uncompensated burden on our hospital emergency departments and medical staffs. Humans needing healthcare will seek it and it is virtually impossible for providers to deny delivering it." - **Ralph E. Koldinger, MD**

"1) what constitutes proof of citizenship? and how readily is that available? 2) there's an implication that indigents are likely to be noncitizens 3) what is an indigent? 4) the poor health of any member of a community affects the health of ALL members of the community 5) means more emergency room visits where all have to be treated 6) society has an obligation to provide basic (and what is 'basic') services to all members of the community" - **Maynard A. Johnston, MD**

"Not providing care to undocumented patients will not only increase traffic to the ER with sicker patients and result in higher costs (it only takes a couple of prolonged ICU stays for untreated pneumonia resulting in septic shock and multi organ system failure to add up to \$2.4 million), but also create a public health nightmare when these sick people come to school, the grocery store, etc. This is not the right place to save money." - **Amy W. Black, MD**

"If we deny care to non-citizens at such facilities, we will simply compound and shift the cost to society by seeing sicker patients in our ED's.

Indeed we need safety nets far greater than we currently have for all underserved people living in this country." - **Marion Leff, MD**

"In the current economic climate, providing illegal residents medical care results in the loss of Sac County employees job. There isn't enough money to do 'the right thing'." - **Charles W. Maas, MD, MPH**

"Indigents refused care at the County level will end up in the ED costing a great deal more for care. Basic health care should be provided to all who need it, regardless of immigration status." - **Joanne Berkowitz, MD**

"Denying preventative primary care services to the individuals in our community who need it most is both morally irresponsible and certain to cause further crowding of our county hospital emergency rooms." - **Elizabeth I. Durbin**

"We are physicians not agents of the immigration and naturalization dept. Our job as physicians is to take care of patients." - **Jeffery J. Rabinovitz, MD**

"As responsible physicians, we are obligated to provide medical care to all who require our medical services. This is, first and foremost, an ethical issue. Moreover, many of the medical problems seen in immigrant populations are communicable and/or ultimately lead to medical crises that affect both the general public health and the ability of our emergency departments to deliver quality care. As such, it just makes good sense for us to serve these populations proactively (and compassionately)." - **Christopher J. Gresens, MD**

"I feel that the County should provide medical care regardless of their citizenship." - **Kieran J. Fitzpatrick, MD**

"It will be much more expensive for the county to pay for care through emergency rooms than through clinics. This will not save the county any money in the long run. It will merely shift the expense line from one entity to another. The new expense line will be much larger. Also, public health could be severely affected. If someone with tuberculosis can't receive treatment because they can't prove they are a citizen, how many other will that person infect due to lack of treatment?" - **Patricia M. Kopko, MD**

"I disagree. As a society we need to provide medical care for our underserved. Funding it has always been a problem. Many physicians at SSVMS have volunteered or tried to volunteer services and have been frustrated at the current situation. I would suspect that all humans, illegal or legal, have medical issues that warrant care and that it is in the public's interest to allow such care to be provided. I have solutions, but am heartbroken at this continued enduring and sad state of affairs for our underserved and needy citizens and non-citizens." - **Lee T. Snook, Jr., MD**

"This population of people would have difficulty complying with this, yet care should not be denied." - **Roseanne E. Pevec, MD**

"Our country is in a fiscal crisis and we cannot afford to provide free care to those who have entered our country unlawfully. I believe that any care necessary to stabilize a person should be provided, but that, if they are not in our country legally, they should be deported back to their country of origin where they can seek medical care. If they come into our country legally, then they can access services. Many people who are citizens or who have entered the country legally are denied care because of overcrowding of community clinics. Priority should go to those who are citizens or who have taken the time to enter the country legally." - **Kelly A. Sharrar, MD**

"Physicians, of all professions, must be supportive of our doctors and nurses who administer care to the needy and put whatever political bias they have away. Those physicians who withhold such emergency care are unworthy to be called "doctors." Most undocumented aliens are here because of a failed immigration policy, because a powerful clique of wealthy agribusiness, hotel, landscape and construction corporations have bought Congressmen into relaxing our borders and letting them come in as "temps" Tax these corporations to pay for the health care for the wake of the humanity that they have brought in.

The county and our congressional representatives are remiss if they cant get these fund through Washington, the seat of the problem. If they fail us, vote them out." - **F. James Rybka, MD**

"Just another step in the long path of losing our humanity. I completely understand the reasons for this; however it would be so much easier to just simply state the obvious reason for this cut back - just no more capital in our system. We should consider cutting out all humanitarian support for other countries in the world. Rather than taking steps such as this, we should consider placing a tax on our fast food industry which wishes to "super size" our orders. " - **James B. Martel, MD**

"It will move this population to ER for care and they are already overloaded. " - **Kenneth L. Corbin, MD**

"They will get their care in the ERs putting the burden on the hospitals." - **Allan H. Galbreath, MD**

"Non – US citizens are members of our community, and our community's shared values are expressed by how we treat our weakest and neediest members" - **Michelle A. James, MD**

"The actual savings from denying care to undocumented immigrants will be offset by the administrative costs to the county for checking the documentation, thus the actual savings will be much less than \$2.4 million. Add the additional cost to the hospitals and ERs from these patients showing up sicker to ERs, the cost to health care sector and our community overall will likely be greater than it is now. " - **Richard Pan, MD, MPH**

"Of course. How did we ever get to a situation in which anyone thought we should provide free services to illegals? Likewise no person in the country illegally should receive anything else paid for with taxpayer funds: school, college tuition, welfare, food stamps, social services, MediCare, etc. And I say this with more on the line than most, as "free" (provided by me) ER visits by illegals are likely to go up if this policy is put into effect. " - **Kelly Nations, MD**