

Uninsured or not, non-citizens still get sick

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- (5) comments

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Everybody from President Barack Obama to Congressman Joe "you lie!" Wilson to Sen. Max Baucus insists federal health care reform should extend no benefits to undocumented workers.

Wilson, R-S.C., got his 15 minutes of fame when he insisted Obama had misrepresented the House bill, which states: "Nothing in this subtitle shall allow federal payments for affordability credits on behalf of individuals who are not lawfully present in the United States."

Baucus, the Montana Democrat, last week released his own health care package, which would bar illegal immigrants from purchasing insurance through newly created state insurance exchanges.

That doesn't mean the millions of people illegally in this country don't get treatment when they're hurt or sick. It just means they get the most expensive type - in the hospital emergency room. And when they do, the taxpayer and the privately insured health care consumer pay for it.

It's the law.

Any hospital that accepts Medicare - virtually all do - must treat anyone who presents himself to an emergency room. It doesn't mean he gets a face lift, but it does say that someone who is in distress will be examined and treated. If the hospital can't meet that patient's needs, it must find a hospital and physician who can.

If that's not clear enough, the 1986 Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act says a hospital can't dump a patient. If the hospital lacks the resources to treat the patient, it's obligated to stabilize him and then arrange for his care at a hospital whose resources can address his concerns. And that next facility also is mandated under the law to accept the sick or injured person.

At no point is the individual asked to produce citizenship papers.

In the last census, Washington had 136,000 illegal immigrants. Idaho had 19,000. The number undoubtedly has grown since. Most of these people lack financial resources. So when they seek help, it's often for something serious and expensive to treat.

Who pays? Sometimes the hospital staff donates its services. Sometimes a hospital's contributors provide charity care. When hospitals absorb costs, they pass these on to patients with a checkbook or a health insurance policy. Taxpayers pick up the rest through programs such as Idaho's medically indigent law, which spends million of property and state tax dollars, some of which go toward treating people illegally in this country.

For example, Tri-State Memorial Hospital in Clarkston estimates 10 percent of its ER patients are registered as uninsured. The hospital writes off \$2 million of its \$84 million in gross revenues as bad debt and an additional \$1 million as charity.

Keeping illegal immigrants sealed off from cheaper, preventive health care is a recipe for greater costs and human suffering. Or is there a whisper out there that the illegal immigrant be denied help? Should the country repeal the Medicare and anti-dumping laws as well as centuries of medical ethics ?

How would that work? If the family of an 8-year-girl suffering from meningitis can't prove citizenship, does the physician send them home? Does he tell the parents their child will be dead within eight hours, but avoid getting near her for fear of becoming infected themselves?

Does the ER deny treatment to a farm worker whose leg has been mangled by machinery, leaving his wounds to become infected?

Or is the ER team merely told to withhold treatment for minor ailments? What might look like a small hand cut could prove fatal for the patient unlucky enough to have never gotten a tetanus shot while growing up in Mexico.

Periodically, America has to scratch its xenophobic itch.

But it's not that hard-hearted a place.

Not yet. -M. T.