Providing Primary and Preventative Care to Undocumented Hispanic Immigrants: Issues of Access, Quality and Cost

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Abstract

With the arrival of thousands of undocumented immigrants in the last decade, the already troubled health care system in the United States is faced with one more challenge: how to address the health care needs of the undocumented in a climate of anti-immigrant sentiment, federal and state fiscal problems, and diminished resources. Federal and state initiatives have created many barriers to prenatal, preventative, and other primary care for undocumented immigrants that negatively impact quality and access to care.

Undocumented immigrants suffer disproportionately from chronic and infectious diseases that may represent a threat to the communities in which they live. Quality of care is affected when pregnant women do not receive prenatal care and give birth to low weight babies who are US citizens. Untreated diabetes ultimately costs millions in emergency care when allowed to progress without treatment. When infectious diseases go undetected and untreated, the whole community suffers.

A combination of measures is imperative for a positive impact on access, quality and cost:

- Increase capacity of community health centers and federally qualified centers with federal grants;
- Eliminate questions regarding immigration status as a requirement for services;
- Require employers to carry insurance for employees or to pay a fee if they do not; fee paid should be used to finance primary and preventative care;
- Use of some funds from the Medicare reform bill to provide primary and preventative care in the community with emphasis on culturally sensitive health education campaigns for immigrants.