

Introduction

POLICY FORUM:

Can We Be Healthy While Our Economy is Unhealthy?

At a time when the unemployment rate is increasing along with the number of people without health insurance we cannot help but ask, "Can we be a healthy state while the economy suffers?"

In today's world of cheap burgers and long commutes to desk-bound jobs it is hard enough to practice healthy behaviors even when you can afford to purchase a gym membership or schedule an appointment with the doctor. If you've lost your job or are working harder to keep the one you have, the choice for a healthy lifestyle becomes even harder.

North Carolina is currently experiencing unemployment rates not seen since the Great Depression. Housing foreclosures are on the rise, family incomes are lower, and budgets for schools, health programs, and health care safety net systems are being cut. Just how much will this hurt the population's health and the health care system? This issue of the *North Carolina Medical Journal* explores these questions from various angles, from dental care to medical care systems to media coverage.

Since employment status and health insurance are so closely intertwined, when individuals start losing jobs, health insurance coverage is quick to follow. Losing a job creates a lot of stress and losing health insurance takes away one option for coping with that stress. This is especially so for those with chronic illness or families to provide for. When faced with reduced incomes and unpayable bills, individuals tend to ignore their health care concerns and needs unless they are urgent.

Studies have demonstrated a strong and positive relationship between health insurance and health status; those with health insurance are more likely to be healthy than those without. Individuals without health insurance often delay visits to health providers for routine exams and screenings, and may ration their prescription drug medications (or not refill them at all) until their condition worsens to the point that they end up on the front steps of the local emergency department. Emergency departments are the most inefficient way to utilize our health care system; they are expensive and they ensure no continuity of care. As our authors point out, during the economic downturn emergency departments are experiencing an increase in admissions.

The downturn has not only affected individuals and their families, but it is also stressing the institutions and professionals who provide care. For hospitals, increases in unemployment rates have meant lower overall reimbursements. During this economic downturn, North Carolina hospitals are seeing decreases in privately insured patients and increases in Medicaid and uninsured patients. Since Medicaid does not offer as high a reimbursement rate as private insurance companies do, and many uninsured patients end up being written off as charity care, hospitals balance sheet are dipping into red ink. In addition, North Carolina's safety net system, the one place that uninsured patients can reliably turn to for their health care needs, is now overwhelmed with uninsured patients. The safety net is seeing volumes that the system has never seen in the past and there are questions about our ability to cope with those new patients. Currently many of these organizations are facing overcapacity and being forced to turn patients away during walk-in clinics, wait times for new patient appointments have dramatically increased, and the system is under duress. To cope with increased demand, hospitals and safety nets are looking for ways to collaborate with other health care organizations to work together and meet the needs of North Carolinians.

However there have, surprisingly, been some positive effects of the downturn. For example, there are indications that the downturn may positively affect the health care workforce, as more people

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seek out the relative stability of these jobs. The economy is also acting as a catalyst for some long overdue attention to our health care system. With the economy tugging on everyone's wallets and health care being on almost everyone's mind, health reform is at the front and center stage for policymakers. Now, more than ever, there is a push to make health reform a reality. For the first time in history, it appears that various stakeholders are in agreement about changing the system and are willing to work together to pass comprehensive health care reform.

So, can we be healthy while the economy is unhealthy? Perhaps, is the best answer we can give. We can and are doing many things to preserve and protect our health with constrained resources. But we also are mindful of a better future and we are building for that while we cope with uncertain times. When things turn around, we hope to emerge stronger and healthier than ever before. Let's take what we learn from this time of economic uncertainty and give North Carolinians a chance for a healthier future.

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