

The Coming Health Care Crisis (Is It Already Here?)

KEOM & ElderHope

Posted by: Chapster

Posted on : Jun-11-2003

No doubt you noticed the rise in your health insurance premiums last year? Did your physician drop out of the Medicare program? This is the script from one of our June Community Focus segments on KEOM. It deals with concerns that we have about the directions that health care is moving.

The Coming Health Care Crisis
KEOM & ElderHope
May 27, 2003
Taped live in the KEOM studios.

Q: So, Barb, what are we talking about today?

A: Well, many folks saw last years health premiums increase last year, as they likely will this year. We are aware that health care has problems, but it seems that it is at the edge of our consciousness. Today we want to explore some significant concerns for the future of health care, all of which are poised to hit us in the next very few years.

First, as a society, most are well-aware that we are entering a time where seniors and the elderly will constitute a much greater percentage of the population. This means that those who are putting in to health care plans, federal or private, will diminish and those who are taking out will increase. A heightened aspect of this is the severity and chronic nature of illness among the older age groups. For instance, in a newsletter we received just yesterday it was reported that among adults the incidence of diabetes increased 61% between 1990 and 2001 (<http://atsh.org/news/diabetes.html>). The costs for treating this increased incidence is enormous.

Q: What is the second concern?

Second, we are witnessing a major shift in responsibility for health care. In Today's Caregiver magazine, physician Vincent Riccardi, writes, "Caregivers will assume financial and hands-on responsibility for what in the 60's, 70's and early 80's was provided by health plans. Be ready." What he is pointing out is that we be increasingly responsible for the care now routinely provided under health care plans. There will be fewer choices and more denials of care.

A third prong of concern is that we are witnessing a growing need for workers in health care and a smaller pool of people willing to work in such settings. Almost all areas of long term care are suffering a lack of skilled workers, even long term care administrators. Workers often report that they do not want to work in these settings because of poor pay, poor benefits, and, probably most importantly, a sense that they do not receive respect or appreciation for their labors. The work is often demeaning and arduous. And, if our listeners haven't noticed the billboards advertising for nurses, let it be said that there is also a shortage of nurses.

Finally, the face of illness has changed. As noted previously, over the last half century, we do not die from accidents and short term illness as much as we used to. Instead, we die from chronic illness, such as heart disease, cancer, lung disease. This will only continue in the years ahead. It seems, as well, that costs for this care continue to rise, relatively unabated.

Q: Is there an answer to these concerns?

A: Well, there is an extensive search for answers. One approach is to shift the financial burden for care, rather than to change the way that care is given. Another approach is to change the philosophy of health care, such as in the Eden Alternative, a unique and innovative approach to long term care that seeks to reimagine the philosophy of long term care as being less custodial and more participatory. Our fear is that the answers that are adopted will be profit-based rather than humanitarian based. We doubt that the economy of the near future will be able to tolerate an approach that is aimed primarily at the generation of profit and stockholder satisfaction.

On a personal level, there are several things that can be done. First, we MUST choose to make health care and lifestyle a lifelong personal priority for ourselves and our families. This involves making daily choices to eat, exercise, and live in a healthy way. It also means that we need to find ways to manage our stress in healthy ways. Second, we should try to maintain a good long term care health policy. Finally, we need to address our concerns about health care with legislators and insurance companies.