

Big jump seen in uninsured

By Sandy Kleffman/Contra Costa Times

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Growing waves of uninsured patients are flooding local community clinics and public hospitals across the Bay Area, increasing pressure on frayed health care safety nets. Many of the newly uninsured lost their health coverage when they lost their jobs.

Unfamiliar with how to cope, some are postponing treatment for chronic conditions until their health worsens severely. Others arrive in emergency rooms with empty medication bottles they hope to get refilled.

At Contra Costa Regional Medical Center, a county-owned hospital in Martinez, counselors help people figure out where they can get help with such problems. The chief of the emergency room said he has not seen anything like this in his 18 years at the hospital.

"You'll see patients who have taken care of themselves all of their lives and all of a sudden don't have health insurance and are at a loss," said Dr. David Goldstein. "We always see some of this, but it's pretty overwhelming at this point."

In Solano County, the trend is growing.

Sutter Solano Medical Center in Vallejo has seen an increase of patients, but relies on a partnership with a near-by clinic. Sy Neilson, spokesman, said Sutter Solano is lucky to have Clinica De La Raza -- which Sutter Solano helps fund -- to send patients to who show up in their emergency rooms.

"We have seen an influx of patients, primarily those uninsured, underinsured or on Medi-Cal," Neilson said. "It seems to be very successful. They could be better served by being seen in the clinic rather than the emergency room." Neilson said if more clinics were available, medical centers could rely more on them and save money.

"We would like to see more clinics in the county as more and more people lose their jobs. We're taking steps, we've been working on this for years."

NorthBay Medical Center hasn't seen a substantial increase to the emergency rooms as the economy got worse, said spokesman Steve Huddleston. He said there were 5,133 visits January of 2008 and that number went up to 5,244 in 2009. In February, the number so far has only increased by four.

"It's a three percent increase (in January), that probably is demographics," Huddleston said. "It's not shocking or stunning. We're not noticing it as much as other hospitals in the greater Bay Area."

He did mention that emergency room workers have noticed the patients seem to be in worse shape than normal, but couldn't prove it was because they weren't going to the doctor as much.

"It could be that people are just sicker," he said. "But more likely, folks that have deductibles or copays are probably putting off going to the doctor one more time."

Across the Bay Area, the numbers tell the story:

Contra Costa Regional Medical Center has seen a 12 percent boost in emergency room patients in the past year. It typically has less than a 5 percent increase.

La Clinica de La Raza has a waiting list with 700 patients who hope to be seen at one of its 27 clinics in the Oakland area, Vallejo and Contra Costa County. La Clinica, which serves low-income and uninsured people, began keeping the list for new patients four months ago. It may discontinue it because the numbers have grown so huge, said Chief Executive Officer Jane Garcia.

On average, community clinics in Contra Costa and Solano counties experienced a 7 percent to 13 percent rise in patients this past year, according to the Community Clinic Consortium.

Reporter Staff Writer Danny Bernardini contributed to this report.

The number of people applying for Medi-Cal in Contra Costa County jumped 76 percent in 2008. Many applicants will not qualify, experts say.

Statewide, California hospitals reported a 33 percent increase in uninsured emergency room patients and a 73 percent jump in consumers having difficulty paying their out-of-pocket medical bills, according to a November survey by the California Hospital Association.

Many of the newly uninsured have to stop seeing longtime providers and find themselves visiting a public hospital or clinic for the first time.

"Just in my own clinic, I've seen patients coming in -- diabetics, hypertensive, cardiovascular disease -- they've been on medications for many years through another health system and they're coming in cold to our system and having to start from scratch," said Dr. William Walker, health services director for Contra Costa County.

"That's just a phenomenon we haven't seen before, even in other kinds of downturns," Walker said. "It's people who never thought they would be getting care in a public system."

On Tuesday, the influential Institute of Medicine reported that insurance is crucial to people's well-being and that lacking it can lead to deteriorating health and premature death.

The committee urged the president and Congress to move swiftly to obtain health insurance for everyone.

People who lack coverage often forgo doctor visits, are likely to be diagnosed with later-stage cancers, and are more likely to die from trauma, heart attacks and strokes, the report notes.

Many people who lose their jobs can continue health insurance coverage if they pay the premium themselves. But the cost puts this benefit, known as COBRA insurance, out of reach of many people, said Tanir Ami, executive director of the Community Clinic Consortium for Contra Costa and Solano counties.

On average, individuals pay 30 percent of their jobless benefits for COBRA insurance, according to a study by Families USA, a consumer group.

To purchase family coverage through COBRA, people often pay 80 percent of their unemployment checks, the group found.

The recently approved federal stimulus package will provide some relief by subsidizing 65 percent of the COBRA premium for the first nine months.

This will temporarily help some people, but it won't provide a long-term solution, Ami said. She noted that employees of companies that go out of business are not eligible for COBRA.