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South Florida BUSINESS JOURNAL

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Health care reform could stretch primary care workforce thin

South Florida Business Journal - by [Brian Bandell](#)

If federal health care reform achieves its goal of providing health coverage to most of the 46.3 million uninsured Americans, it could strain a large segment of the local medical provider workforce, many experts warn.

The bills proposed before Congress could give patients who were uninsured, and more likely to put off preventive care, access to insurance so they can see family physicians. While this could prove good for their health and their wallets, it is not clear whether there will be enough workers on the primary care side of health care to accommodate all those new patients.

According to a survey released in November by the Florida Department of Health, nearly 14 percent of family physicians in Florida were age 67 and older. South Florida has one family physician for every 5,957 residents.

Another survey, by **Merritt Hawkins & Associates**, found that the average wait time to see a family physician in the Miami area was seven days. And that's with nearly one in five residents without health coverage and unlikely to get an appointment unless they pay cash.

"The fallacy is to believe that if we cover everyone, they will have access to primary care," said Divina Grossman, the dean of **Florida International University's** College of Nursing and Health Sciences. "Just because I have a card doesn't mean I can find service if there aren't enough providers."

She pointed to the health reform plan in Massachusetts, which has increased insurance coverage, but given providers a big challenge in meeting demand from new patients.

Workforce training with reform

While Grossman supports the national reform effort because it would improve the health of many people, she said boosting workforce training should accompany it. This includes nursing, where there's already a national shortage that is projected to worsen, as educational institutions can't keep up with increasing demand and retiring nurses.

Grossman said that more nurse practitioners, who can see patients in a primary care or health clinic setting, could meet the extra demand brought on by health reform.

Doctors and nurses aren't the only professions that would be needed to serve newly insured patients, said Dr. Robert Hasty, an assistant professor of internal medicine at **Nova Southeastern University** and physician at Palmetto General Hospital. Demand will also increase for pharmacists, radiology technicians, occupational therapists and physical therapists, he said.

The Obama administration hopes to get the jump on this issue by tapping into the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

On Sept. 11, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said \$33 million in stimulus funding would go to health care workforce training, including scholarships, centers of excellence, schools of public health and career opportunity programs. Of those awards, \$3.1 million went to Florida universities such as FIU.

"Sixty-five million Americans can't see a primary care physician today because of a shortage in their community," Sebelius said during a conference call. "That's why we need to expand the health care workforce, so we can't wait for Congress to act."

Mary Wakefield, the administrator of the Health Resources and Services Administration, said she doesn't have a current estimate of how many workers would be needed to support the newly insured patients under health care reform. But, she said, improvements in technology that are being encouraged by the stimulus program should make primary care more efficient.

Baptist Health South Florida CEO Brian Keeley said there is not enough lead time to train the amount of family physicians that would be needed to meet the demands of health reform. He recommends that the government increase the funding for primary care-focused medical schools and increase the Medicare reimbursements for primary care services so more medical students choose that field.

Typically, family physicians earn less than specialties and must see a higher volume of patients to make up for it. The emphasis on primary care over specialty care could reduce health costs, since family physicians generally use less-expensive methods of treating patients than specialists do, Keeley said.

However, Pete Martinez, senior VP and chief technology and innovations officer at Wellington-based health information technology firm **Quantum Group** (AMEX: QGP), said the current health reform proposals would drive up the cost of care. He points to basic economics. When patient demand for primary care increases without an equivalent increase in providers, prices will escalate rapidly and quality will



Mark Freerks

Divina Grossman instructs anesthesia nursing student Susan Wigetman at Florida International University in Miami.

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go down, he said.

"Saying that access means being insured is the wrong definition," Martinez said. "The right definition of access is, 'Can I get care when I need it?' If you apply this current course, we would pay more than we do today for less quality of care that we can't receive when we need it."

Martinez said the first steps to fixing health care should be revamping the primary care system with new technologies, education techniques and payment structures.

Hasty said that getting students into family medicine residency programs has been difficult because of the low reimbursement and the lack of funding to host training. He said help could come from the Resident Physician Shortage Reduction Act of 2009, which has been proposed by a bipartisan group in the House and by Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., in the Senate. It would redistribute the funding for unused residency slots to hospitals that have demand for them.

THE DETAILS:

South Florida recipients of stimulus funding

Scholarships for disadvantaged students:

- [Palm Beach Community College](#), Lake Worth: \$3,521
- [Carlos Albizu University](#), Miami: \$60,357
- Florida International University Board of Trustees, Miami: \$315,538
- [Barry University](#), Miami Shores: \$25,351
- Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale: \$103,278
- [University of Miami](#), Coral Gables: \$14,084

Public health traineeships:

- Florida International University, Miami: \$43,2751

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