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Poll: Many people skip, delay care

By: Eric Reinhardt
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Nearly six out of 10 Americans have skipped or delayed seeking health care because of the cost, according to the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation's April Health Tracking Poll released April 24.

The poll, the second in a series designed and analyzed by the foundation's public-opinion survey-research team, examines voters' specific health-care issue interests, experiences, and perceptions about health-care reform.

Instead of seeking a health-care plan, 42 percent of respondents substituted home remedies or over-the-counter drugs for doctor visits, and 36 percent skipped dental care or check-ups.

Additionally, 29 percent did not fill a prescription for medicine, and 18 percent cut pills in half or skipped doses.

The survey question solicited responses for each of seven alternatives to using a health-care plan.

The Kaiser study describes what people do when they can't afford health care, says David Knowlton, a board member of The HealthWell Foundation, a Gaithersburg, Md.-based national nonprofit, charitable organization that helps individuals pay for certain out-of-pocket health-care costs, such as prescription-drug co-payments and health-insurance premiums.

"And what you're seeing is we're facing a tsunami of uninsured because of the economic downturn," Knowlton says.

Knowlton, based in Trenton, N.J., is that state's former deputy commissioner of health who testified before a House subcommittee on health in the spring 2008 about the plight of the nation's uninsured.

He thinks older Americans who've lost their jobs following several years of steady employment are especially affected in the weakened economy because they never expected to be uninsured.

"What's significant about that group is this is a group that can't afford to be without coverage because they're older and more likely to have something wrong with them," Knowlton says.

When people confront an inability to pay for health care, they do things like avoiding care, cutting pills in half, and substituting over-the-counter remedies. These issues become a problem because it can lead to additional health problems.

Knowlton once spoke with a woman who takes drugs for high blood pressure, but can't afford to pay for them. Her solution: taking them four days before seeing her doctor to ensure a good blood-pressure reading. Knowlton says the woman doesn't understand the harm she's doing.

"The consequences could be a stroke," he adds.

It's possible the woman Knowlton spoke of might be like the 59 percent in the Kaiser health-tracking poll who believe the United States needs to address health-care reform now, despite the weakened economy. Nearly 40 percent say the issue can wait.

A lingering question in the issue of health-care reform is how to pay for it. The survey suggests continued support for taxing the wealthy in order to pay for reform. Currently about 70 percent of respondents support increasing taxes on families earning more than \$250,000 per year, this is nearly the identical proportion of those who supported the proposal last December, according to the Kaiser survey.

However, only 28 percent would support higher income taxes for all taxpayers. Fully half the respondents "strongly oppose" such a plan.

"Americans believe all Americans should have health care," Knowlton says, noting the study has been replicated several times.

He also points out the study suggests six in 10 respondents favor using the so-called "sin taxes" on soda, alcohol, junk food, and cigarettes - items that are thought to be "unhealthy."

Knowlton calls the sin tax "the law of diminishing return." If an unhealthy item is taxed to the point of reducing the bad behavior, then the tax revenue drops from sales of those items.

"Sin taxes are very hard to generate revenue from that's sustainable over time," he adds.

As far as specific options for health-care reform, a range of proposals meets with majority support, according to the Kaiser poll. Topping the list in terms of popularity is a Medicare buy-in for those aged 55 to 64. Overall, about 79 percent of respondents expressed support for such a proposal.

The Kaiser Family Foundation, based in Menlo Park, Calif., conducted the health tracking poll April 2 through April 8 among a nationally representative random sample of 1,203 adults, ages 18 and older.

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