

Health care reform links all missions

One in six Oregonians is without health insurance; many more are underinsured and not able to access timely health care. And now, the number of uninsured is sure to grow alarmingly. Already, in recent months patient requests to OHSU for financial aid to help pay for health care costs have risen dramatically. Thus, the global economic crisis underscores the necessity of reform. In addition to improving access, reform will help us collectively rein in health care costs and, by extension, lower insurance premiums.

Health care reform is not the exclusive domain of the clinical mission. Education and research are critical elements too. Many faculty members, students and others in the OHSU School of Medicine are actively involved in reform efforts. The School of Medicine adopted a set of "Principles for Health Care Reform" last year. Three aspects of the principles stand out to illustrate how health care reform links all of our missions.

1) A focus on supporting "health" in a system of universal access. Every person should have access to a defined set of health care services, and this must include health promotion and prevention. In turn, this means that health care delivery and its financing must reflect a system in which health, not just disease-based intervention, is robustly supported.

2) A recognition that provider education is crucial to reform. Reform efforts must include ways to explicitly fund the education of a provider workforce that can deliver our ideal vision of a health care system; for example, if we are to emphasize team-based health care and medical homes, we must fund appropriately targeted education.

3) A recognition of the role of discovery in improving health. From evidence-based medicine to less invasive surgery to better understanding the role of nutrition and discovering new cures, research has the potential to improve health and to lower costs. Finding ways to ensure that research is funded must be integral to reform.

We cannot continue to support a system in which so many people have no access to health care; it's not ethical, it constrains us from fulfilling our missions as we might, and it's unsustainable. But unless we address the role of education and research in health care reform, we may end up trading one set of problems for another. The time is right for health care reform and for fundamental change. Let's bang the drum.

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