

TRENDS & Ideas

HEALTHCARE

Uncovering the Hidden Costs

Although most Americans are satisfied with the personal healthcare they receive, they also believe they pay too much for it in comparison to citizens of other nations. But this sense is vague—and that vagueness has helped defeat national reform efforts. In *The Nation's Health Care Bill: Who Bears the Burden?* the Center for Health Economics Research (CHER) has made the costs more concrete.

In 1980, CHER notes, the United States was spending 9.2 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on healthcare; by the early 1990s the corresponding figure was 13 percent. In other countries, healthcare's share of GDP tends to remain constant. If the United States had limited its healthcare spending to the growth of GDP in the 1980s, CHER calculates that in 1990 an additional \$150 billion would have been available to:

- Congress, which could have

reduced income taxes 4.4 percent, or cut the deficit 10 percent, or doubled its spending on a whole set of public programs, including science and education, children's and school improvement programs, student loans, foreign aid, and pollution control.

- Business, which could have

saved \$52 billion in 1990 alone. With this savings, businesses could have given each employee a \$600 larger raise; or increased investment 9 percent; or enjoyed 16 percent higher pretax profits; or spent 70 percent more on research and development; or increased job training expenditures 173 percent.

- Families, which could have saved \$41 billion in 1990, or \$418 per family. Families could have saved the "excess," spent it on necessities, or purchased luxury goods."

Ultimately," CHER says, "the entire \$150 billion in excess health spending in 1990 is paid for by all of us in one way or another."

By the year 2000, CHER notes, the United States is expected to devote 18 percent of its GDP to healthcare costs. This means that wealth available for nonhealth needs will have to shrink even more sharply. "If we do not act now, we will pay the price in terms of a lower standard of living for everything besides health care," CHER says.



Sim Gellman

VALUES

Strong Spirits

Because actions speak louder than words, they are the best way to communicate values.

This is the idea behind the Spirit Committees found in the Alexian Brothers Health System, Inc., Elk Grove Village, IL, as reported in the *Alexian Way*.

Spirit Committees, begun in the 1970s at each Alexian Brothers institution, have more recently been expanded as part of an effort to inculcate the brothers' values in employees. But

the committees are run by employees themselves, and they vary from facility to facility.

Some committees arrange retreats and prayer services. Others create programs in which employees send each other congratulations or condolences in recognition of events in

their private lives, or honor each other for being particularly good at their jobs.

Still other committees turn their fo-

cus toward the community. At Alexian Brothers Hospital in San Jose, CA, for example, a hospital-wide employees' Spirit Committee buys gifts at Christmas for needy area children.

Such expressions of generosity help lift employee morale, says the *Alexian Way*. Br. Felix Bettendorf, CFA, the system's president, notes that "the committees help to improve the overall work environment, which, in turn, enhances how our people treat the patients and families that come to us."



MEDICAL EDUCATION

Increasing Minority Representation Requires Collaborative Efforts

Although some minority groups are being increasingly represented at our nation's medical schools, others—blacks, Mexican Americans, mainland Puerto Ricans, and American Indians—remain

G. Petersdorf, MD, in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

One approach is for a medical school to develop a magnet high school health professions program or part-



“underrepresented minorities.” The Association of American Medical Colleges has been trying to change this since 1990, when it initiated its Project 3000 by 2000. The project's goal is “to enroll 3,000 students from underrepresented minority groups annually in U.S. medical schools by the year 2000,” write Herbert W. Nickens, MD; Timothy P. Ready, PhD; and Robert

ner with such a program already in place, the authors suggest. If such programs were available nationwide, they could “substantially increase” the number of underrepresented minority medical students, the authors say. To date, 42 medical schools are in partnerships that administer magnet high school health sciences programs.

In addition, science-edu-

cation partnerships will help increase the number of underrepresented minority medical students. In these partnerships, explain the authors, “educators based in academic health centers work more broadly to improve the quality of science education in one school system or several.” Effective coordination and program quality determine the success of these science-education partnerships.

The Baylor College of Medicine partnership with

TECHNOLOGY

Telemedicine Hits a Glitch

Unless it first overcomes several barriers, telemedicine will not experience the surge its proponents have predicted. Describing a report from the Center for Health Policy Research, *Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society (HIMSS)* News explains that the technology lacks the financial and physician support it needs to live up to its potential.

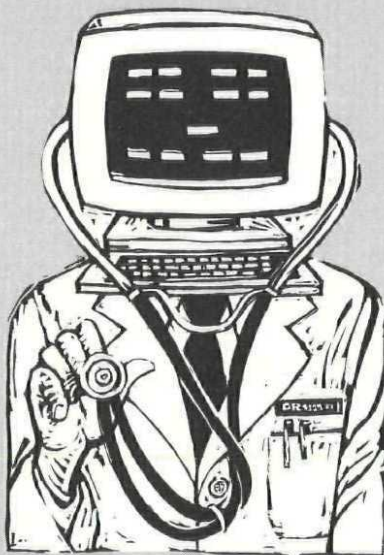
Patients have quickly adapted to telemedicine, and most doctors who have used the technology like it, notes the report, “Analysis of Expansion of Access to Care Through Use of Telemedicine and Mobile Health Services.” However, according to telephysician Ace Allen, MD, fewer than 1,000 teleconsultations took place in 1993. The report suggests that this low figure is a result of telemedicine's high costs (currently \$100,000 a year for one telemedicine site). In addition, some physicians and providers are not enamored of the technology.

Although cardiologists and dermatologists are using telemedicine, radiologists who travel among rural towns reading images view telemedicine as a threat because they believe it reduces the need for

their services, according to *HIMSS News*.

The practice of medicine across state lines also raises state licensure issues, points out Jim Grigsby, a principal investigator in the Center for Health Policy Research study. He explains that well-served states could set rigid practice boundaries, while underserved states may be more accommodating about such boundaries by saying that patients are being electronically transported to the state in which the physician is practicing.

Despite these issues, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration has continued to support the University of Florida's (UF's) System 2000—an electronic medical library and records-keeping system. Originally intended to help space station crew members who were ill, this “medical informatics system” can assist physicians who choose to remain on earth. System 2000 includes the text of 12 medical reference books and more than 1,000 medical journals and allows physicians to maintain paperless medical records, confirm diagnoses, solve bewildering medical problems, issue prescriptions, and better inform patients about their care, reports UF.



Houston-area teachers is one of the 63 science-education partnerships currently in existence. Instead of being required to memorize science facts, students are encouraged to problem solve and think analytically in this revamped middle-school science curriculum.

Another tactic is for two or more educational institutions to guide students along the “educational pipeline”—from high school to college and from college to medical school, explain the authors.

Forty-two such agreements are already in place. Institutions collaborate to prevent curriculum redundancy, guarantee admission to students who have demonstrated “acceptable academic performance,” and offer financial assistance. Nickens, Ready, and Petersdorf assert, “Closer collaboration between medical schools and the undergraduate schools that supply them with minority-group applicants is crucial to the success of the project.”