

Uninsured in America: Old News, but More Important Than Ever



BY SCOTT
McCONAHA

Editor

smcconaha@
chausa.org

My 11-year-old daughter recently broke her arm. It was the first real health emergency my wife and I have experienced with any of our four children. For that, we are grateful, especially when we compare our little crisis to some of the trauma and illness that other families have to endure. What we aren't so good at being grateful for, however, is the fact that our trip to the emergency room that evening, outpatient surgery, and subsequent visits to the orthopedist, cost us less than \$200. In fact, the multi-color pack of magic markers for all the signatures on her cast was more expensive than our co-pay for her prescription pain medication. We've come to expect such affordable health care. We take it for granted.

Catholic social teaching upholds health care as a fundamental human right. But in the United States, access to adequate health care is more of a privilege. My family, by virtue of the benefits package offered through my employer, has the privilege of never having to think twice about visiting the doctor or buying medicine. Thousands of people in my own city, though, know that a trip to the emergency room means rent won't get paid, groceries won't be purchased, and bankruptcy will become an even more ominous reality.

The ever-increasing number of uninsured and underinsured Americans is an appalling tragedy that the Catholic health ministry has been struggling to improve for years. That doesn't mean, however, that it is no longer front-page news. Civil rights leaders succeeded because they remained loud and persistent at a time when many others simply accepted racial discrimination as unchangeable. It will take the same unwavering dedication if we are to positively affect the crisis of the uninsured. The picture, however, is not all bleak. We're witnessing a climate shift when it comes to children's health care. This is most noticeable in the positive outlook for a reauthorization of SCHIP. But there is still a lot of work remaining.

The special section in this issue of *Health Progress* reflects the Catholic health ministry's commitment to those who go without adequate access to health care. The articles here are another step in our ongoing search for new, effective health reform ideas. This publication, along with CHA's Covering a Nation program, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's *Cover the Uninsured Week*, and all the advocacy efforts carried out by Catholic health organizations across the country, are but some of the many "voices" that must remain loud and persistent as we seek to create a health care system that forces no parent to think twice about taking a sick child to the doctor.