

Close to Home

By Kelly Pfeifer, MD

Ten years ago, the County of Sonoma assigned the job of caring for the poor to Sutter Healthcare as part taking over Community Hospital. Now Sutter is closing this hospital and would like Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital to assume that role. However, in the last 10 years, the health care environment has changed dramatically. Far more people are falling through the cracks – there are more uninsured, more immigrants, more people without access, and fewer doctors. Sutter Healthcare can not afford to subsidize a broken health care system by over 7 million dollars a year.

Many of the factors leading to our health care crisis are complex, and are challenging to solve. However, one factor that led to Sutter's decision to close is an obvious, fixable problem: uncompensated emergency care.

For every million dollars in uncompensated emergency room care, a community clinic could take care of the primary care needs of almost 3,000 people for an entire year. Memorial and Kaiser are working feverishly to expand their capacity to be able to handle more ER visits. But is this the only answer?

When people have access to their doctor they don't go to the emergency room. Yet minor ailments added up to 64% of the emergency visits seen at Sutter last year. People use the emergency room for "free care" if they feel they cannot afford a doctor, when they don't know where to go for help, or when the local clinic tells them the first open appointment is six weeks from now. Each of these visits costs a hospital fifty times the amount it costs a clinic, but the higher price tag does not always mean better care.

An uninsured diabetic who goes in to the ER with a sprained ankle will not see a nutritionist to learn about a healthy diet, nor will he be registered for a free medication program, and a diabetes support group. The emergency room does not provide preventive care, does not offer this patient counseling for depression, or an appointment to get a dental cavity filled. These services, and more, would have been offered at a community clinic. And without this support, the patient will likely be back in the ER, eventually.

Unfortunately, Memorial's stated plans to build a new urgent care center will not solve the problem of overcrowded emergency rooms. When an uninsured patient goes to an urgent care clinic, they walk out with a prescription they cannot afford, and a bill they cannot pay. They end up in the emergency room anyway.

The problem of the uninsured becomes a crisis for all of us, regardless of our walk of life. If you are in an ambulance with a heart attack, and all the ERs are full of patients with coughs and colds, your insurance will not protect you from delay in care.

We hope that the local hospitals recognize that one of the best paths to ensuring their emergency rooms remain open to those who need them is to invest in the community clinics. The mission of these clinics is to provide medical homes for uninsured and

MediCal patients, and to ensure that patients can access their provider when they need care, before problems become emergencies. But the community clinics in Sonoma County are at capacity right now. With more space, longer hours, and more providers, the community health centers could provide medical homes to prevent uninsured patients from resorting to emergency rooms.

Communities all across the country have demonstrated that \$1 spent on community clinics saves at least \$3 in unpaid hospital bills. In an environment where every entity is struggling for survival, everyone feels as though they have nothing more to give. But if everyone contributes a little, we could have enough resources in this county to take care of everyone's health care needs. Let's not waste this opportunity.