

Joaquin Arambula: Fresno health care: forget politics, focus on people

By Joaquin
Arambula

As an emergency room doctor in a small, rural Valley community, I work the front lines taking care of the sick, the elderly, and the poor. I have a moral and legal obligation to see every patient that comes through our doors, and am proud to do so, without regard to where they were born or their ability to pay. I am a healer and have taken an oath to provide care to all my patients.

Since the 1980s, Fresno County has helped provide this specialty health care to hard-working and tax-paying Valley residents through the Medically Indigent Services Program (MISP). But last year, the Board of Supervisors voted to end the program.

MISP essentially ended Dec. 1, 2014, although local community leaders and residents, working with county and state elected officials, found a way to, at least temporarily, continue providing specialty medical care for all poor and uninsured residents in Fresno County. Now, as an emergency room doctor and an advocate for my patients, I must ask: Where is the care? Where is the new program that will provide specialty health care for uninsured, underinsured and undocumented residents?

When we view health care as an “issue”, instead of a human right, patients will always lose. This is the time for action, as the health of thousands of Fresno County residents is already in jeopardy.

While the Board of Supervisors nearly three months ago directed county staff to negotiate an agreement with Community Medical Centers and community clinics to provide specialty care for all residents in our county, funds are still needed to build a robust community health network that supports our current providers and creates multiple points of access into our health care system.

The county needs to invest in a strong safety net to complement the care that our clinics, private providers, and public health department are already providing. When it comes to health care, let's forget politics and focus on people.

Without a health care safety net, many uninsured local families will be forced to visit emergency rooms as their only health care option, and that's expensive — for all of us.

All Fresno County residents will ultimately pay a hidden tax and higher medical expenses that will result from these visits to the ER. But more importantly, it's not right. The ER is for emergencies, *not* for primary or specialist care. And as an ER doctor, I know we need all of our resources to respond to life-or-death situations.

Specialty care helps prevent small health problems from turning into catastrophic ones, and any doctor will tell you prevention is critical. The uninsured are already less likely to receive preventive care, and less likely to seek care as quickly when they are sick or hurt. When they do seek treatment, it results in higher costs, which are ultimately passed on to covered consumers in the form of higher premiums.

Furthermore, in the United States, about 7 in 10 deaths are related to preventable diseases such as obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease. Prevention is more powerful than treatment.

The Fresno County Board of Supervisors ultimately showed leadership to negotiate a deal that would provide specialty care for uninsured and undocumented residents. I encourage the board to show leadership once again and make sure this program gets implemented.

We can't afford to wait. Thousands of Fresno County residents need help now. I encourage the Board of Supervisors to redouble its efforts to build out and maintain a health care system that serves us all, and that places patients above politics.

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