

Affordable Care Act is a big help to rural residents

Family doctor affirms many of her patients have benefited

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Nearly 60 million U.S. citizens are estimated to live in rural areas – myself included. We have higher rates of chronic medical diseases, higher rates of morbidity – but disproportionately less access to the health care we need.

Passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2010 helped change this reality – and the reality of how I care for my neighbors, friends and colleagues here in rural Illinois.

As a small-town doctor, I've been pleased that more people who had previously delayed or gone without health care have now been able to come into our clinic since the ACA came into effect.

At the same time, I've been so puzzled when friends and neighbors have complained about how "Obamacare is messing things up."

Although our government has been making major efforts to help protect our most vulnerable patients, particularly those who have been uninsured or underinsured, much misinformation has been circulating about the ACA.

As a physician who has cared for patients in rural Illinois for the better part of 15-plus years, I can tell you firsthand about what having access to health insurance has meant to my patients and the team caring for them.

Prior to the law, many patients without insurance often would avoid seeing me or any doctor because they worried more about bills than their health. Having insurance makes a difference in people's lives.

Women who become pregnant now know that their insurance plan will cover their care during their pregnancy – something that was not true before the law.

Children can be seen for developmental screenings and get early intervention for speech therapy, physical therapy or other services to assist at-risk youths before problems become worse.

No longer do patients have to wait for a condition or symptom to become so advanced that it sickens them to the point of needing hospitalization.

Patients with pre-existing conditions can now access affordable health insurance and are no longer discriminated against by insurance plans.

Patients can now get routine screenings for cancer and access to other preventative care like vaccinations.

Patients I see are now able to get medications they never could afford or take previously due to their lack of insurance. No longer is there as much fear for bankruptcy that often resulted from an illness or injury that was out of their control.

In short, the ACA is having real positive impact on our patients and by extension, their families – and our community.

This is not to say that our health care system is without issues. Drug prices and medical costs have been rising for decades – long before the ACA was passed. Co-payments for certain services and tests are too expensive for some of our patients.

The ACA was an important start in addressing some of these issues, but more needs to be done.

But the solution is not repeal and delay. It is irresponsible and dangerous for politicians to say that the solution to these issues is ripping health insurance away from millions of patients and their families – and in the process, destroying the ability of many in our community here from seeking medical care from providers like me.

As someone who has dedicated herself to caring for the health needs of children, adults and entire families in our community for years, I have often felt afraid to speak up regarding these issues until recently.

Both patients and colleagues will tell you that I do my best to not just care for people in a moment of urgency, but am dedicated to ensuring that they are aware of chronic medical problems and the importance of working at them over time. Necessary to my ability to help patients is that they have access to health insurance and with it, basic guaranteed services that every insurance plan should contain.

The ACA provides that to our health care system. It should be strengthened – not threatened by our new Congress and president-elect.

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