

Optimism, Skepticism, and Uncertainty: A Qualitative Study on the Knowledge and Perceived Impact of the Affordable Care Act among Adult Patients Seeking Care in a Free Clinic

Authors : Mike Wei, Mario Cedillo, Jiahui Lin, Carol Lorraine Storey-Johnson, Carla Boutin-Foster

Abstract : Purpose: The extent to which health insurance enrollment succeeds under the Affordable Care Act (ACA) rests heavily on the ability to reach the uninsured and motivate them to enroll. We sought to identify perceptions about the ACA among uninsured patients at a free clinic in New York City. Background: The ACA holds tremendous promise for reducing the number of uninsured Americans. As of April 2014, nearly 8 million people had signed up for health insurance through the Health Insurance Marketplace. Despite this early success, future and continued enrollment rests heavily on the degree of public awareness. Reaching eligible individuals and increasing their awareness and understanding remains a fundamental challenge to realizing the full potential of the ACA. Reaching out to uninsured patients who are seeking care through safety net facilities such as free clinics may provide important avenues for reaching potential enrollees. This project focuses on the experience at the free clinic at Weill Cornell Medical College, the Weill Cornell Community Clinic (WCCC), and seeks to understand perceptions about the ACA among its patient population. Methods: This was a cross-sectional study of all patients who visited the free clinic at Weill Cornell Medical College, the Weill Cornell Community Clinic, from July 2013 to May 2014. Patients who provided informed consent at their visit and completed a semi-structured questionnaire were included (N=62). The questionnaire comprised of questions about demographic characteristics and open-ended questions about their knowledge and perception of the impact of the ACA. Descriptive statistics were used to characterize the population demographics. Qualitative coding techniques were used for open-ended items. Results: Approximately one third of patients surveyed never had health insurance. Of the remaining 65%, 20% lost their insurance within the past year. Only 55% had heard about the ACA, and only 10% knew about the Health Benefits Exchange. Of those who had heard about the ACA, sentiments were tinged with optimistic misperceptions, such as "it will be free health care for all." While optimistic, most of the responses focused on the economic implications of the ACA. Conclusions: These findings reveal the immense amount of misconception and lack of understanding with regards to the ACA. As such, the study highlights the need to educate and address the concerns of those who remain skeptical or uncertain about the implications of the ACA.

Keywords : Affordable Care Act, demographics, free clinics, underserved.

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