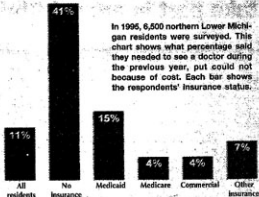


Health care access — or lack of it — in northern Lower Michigan

In 1995, 6,500 northern Lower Michigan residents were surveyed. This chart shows what percentage said they needed to see a doctor during the previous year, but could not because of cost. Each bar shows the respondents' insurance status.



SOURCES: Regional Health Assessment Survey, Sept. 1995, area hospitals and health departments

Traverse City Record Eagle 12/22/97

New focus put on uninsured children

■ Munson commits \$200,000 to make sure all children up to age 2 get preventive health care

By DIANE CONNERS
Record-Eagle staff writer

TRAVERSE CITY — Sparked by estimates of a high number of uninsured families, Munson Medical Center and area health departments will start a program to help make sure that all area children up to age 2 can receive

basic preventive health care.

Munson has committed \$200,000 to start the program, which will serve more than just uninsured families, said Fred Keeslar, director of the Grand Traverse County Health Department.

"We keep waiting for the federal government to address these problems," said John Rockwood, president of Munson Healthcare, the hospital's parent company. "I think we have to recognize that a lot of this comes down to local responsibility and our local values on how we treat our kids."

Organizers were hesitant to dis-

cuss details because the program is still in its infancy. Much depends on other possible funding and information that still must be collected on area needs.

The first step, though, is to make sure everyone knows about services already available in the community.

The hospital is interviewing candidates to find a nurse to help develop the local program over the next six months to a year. One thing the nurse will do is help create a hotline phone system for

See NEW FOCUS, Page 2A

Traverse City Record Eagle 12/02/97

New focus put on uninsured children

◀Continued from Page 1A

families and doctors who want to know more about available financial aid, transportation, counseling and medical services in the region.

Everyone who has a baby at Munson Medical Center also will receive a series of newsletters about the kinds of check-ups their babies should be getting and when, and what services are available. About 1,900 babies are born at the hospital each year. Munson's service area includes Antrim, Benzie, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska and Leelanau counties.

Babies should get a series of 10 "well-child" check-ups over two years to monitor their development, vision and hearing and to get immunizations.

There also will be an effort to make sure women get proper prenatal care. There still are many women who come to the emergency room in labor who have never seen a doctor during pregnancy, said Tom

Spencer, hospital spokesman.

Ultimately, the hospital and health departments would like to make sure children up to age 13 get all the health care they need, Rockwood said, but that depends on funding.

The state of Michigan will start its MI-Child program in April. It will extend health insurance to children in many families who cannot afford insurance now and don't qualify for Medicaid. Once that program is in place, local health officials can determine whether there still are unmet needs.

The hospital and health departments for Benzie, Grand Traverse and Kalkaska counties also have applied for a \$200,000 grant from the Michigan Family Independence Agency to expand local programs for teen parents, the Head Start preschool program and home nurse visits to help new moms. Now, nurse visits are only for moms on Medicaid, said Deanna Kelly, personal health administrator for Grand Tra-

verse County. The state expects to decide on the grant Dec. 28.

A study completed two years ago by local health departments and hospitals showed 41 percent of people without insurance here put off going to a doctor because of cost, compared to 15 percent of people on Medicaid, the state's insurance plan for the poor, and four to seven percent of people with standard health insurance.

While the exact number of uninsured children regionally is unavailable, health professionals believe the rate is higher in northwestern Lower Michigan than the rest of the state, where an estimated 8.5 percent are uninsured. More people here are apt to have part-time jobs in the tourism industry or work for small employers who can't always afford to provide insurance.

This is not the first time Munson and health departments have worked together.

A couple of years ago, the Grand

Traverse department and Munson worked to make immunizations of children easier. Even families with NorthMed HMO insurance weren't always getting their children needed shots.

Munson now offers immunizations on a walk-in basis from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. seven days a week in its pediatrics unit. Of 17,270 child immunizations in the last year, 82 percent were at the hospital and the remainder at the health department. The health department simply deputized the hospital to provide its immunizations at its more convenient hours.

"I think we are building on that success," said Keelester, with the Grand Traverse Health Department.

The health departments for Antrim, Benzie, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska and Leelanau counties are involved in the current effort.

"We can prove that by working together we can help the health of those kids," Rockwood said.