

## Shortage of Doctors and Nurses Will Test Future Health Care System

### Smarter, more confident consumers could spell relief

As health care reform rolls out, we can expect an estimated 32 million currently uninsured Americans to enter the system by the end of this decade, but who will be caring for all of us? The American Medical Association estimates a doctor shortage of 125,000 to 159,000 by the year 2025.<sup>1</sup>

Adding to the system's challenges, baby boomer primary care doctors and nurses will be retiring in record numbers during the next 10 to 15 years, just as the baby boom generation enters the Medicare system. Currently, at least 40 percent of all doctors are over 55 in age. About a third of the much larger nursing workforce is 50 or older, and about 55 percent say they intend to retire in the next 10 years, according to a Nursing Management Aging Workforce Survey by the Bernard Hodes Group.<sup>2</sup>

The combined effects of these events, along with the millions of new patients entering the nation's health care system, could create "the perfect storm" of health care shortfalls, leaving the nation's health care system stretched beyond its limits. These factors will also make it more difficult for some health consumers to find a primary care doctor and to receive appropriate treatment. Waiting times are expected to grow longer for those who can find service within the system.

Health care consumers will need to get smart about how to better manage their personal health choices, focusing more on self-management of common ailments and chronic diseases, with a goal of prevention and wellness. Health consumers will also have a new responsibility to help reduce costs and alleviate extra burdens on an already overtaxed system.

In a demand-led society such as the United States, many people go to the doctor even when they know that doctor can do nothing more than tell them to go home, rest, take acetaminophen or ibuprofen for discomfort and drink plenty of fluids. If those consumers chose responsible self-care instead of a trip to the doctor or ER, the savings to the health care system could be substantial. With the average cost of \$100 per doctor's visit in the U.S., it may be wise to consider an alternative point of care for minor illness consultations, like a retail or worksite clinic. These visits are less costly and are often reimbursed by health plans.

**HealthSMART tip:** Consumers can act responsibly to save money and reduce pressure on the health care systems by focusing on self-care efforts that prevent illness and promote general good health. When a minor illness or ailment arises, such as congestion from a cold, sleeplessness, minor sunburn or skin irritation, learn about how you may be able to effectively relieve symptoms with an over-the-counter medication. If you are not sure, consider a visit to a retail or worksite clinic where you can talk with a health care professional. Check with your health plan or employers about what resources are available to you to make HealthSMART decisions.

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<sup>1</sup> AMA Works to Strengthen the Physician Workforce to Meet the Nation's Health Care Needs. Press release. American Medical Association, June 14, 2010. Accessed at: <http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/news/news/strengthen-physician-workforce.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> Fears, D. Retirements by baby-boomer doctors, nurses could strain overhaul. The Washington Post, June 14, 2010. Accessed at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/13/AR2010061304096.html?hpid=topnews>