IN THE JOURNALS

US health care ranks poorly in accessibility, affordability


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More adults in the United States reported issues with health status and material hardships than adults from eleven other high-income countries, according to results from a 2016 survey published in *Health Affairs*.

“Surveys of patients’ experiences with health care services can provide a valuable window into how well a nation’s health system is meeting the needs of its population,” Robin Osborn, vice president of the International Program in Health Policy and Practice Innovations at the Commonwealth Fund, and colleagues wrote.

Osborn and colleagues evaluated data from a 2016 survey of the health and health care experiences among adults from eleven countries including Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States. The survey was administered by telephone and conducted between March and June 2016. The researchers weighted data to ensure that the results represented the total general population of adults in each country.

Survey results showed all countries experienced shortcomings in patient engagement and chronic care management, with at least one in five adults reporting an issue in care coordination. However, adults from the U.S. were more likely than any other country to report having at least two chronic health conditions (28%) and emotional distress (26%). They also more often reported feeling worried about being able to pay for nutritious meals (15%) and housing (16%). Similarly, adults in Canada ranked higher in rates of chronic conditions, emotional distress and material hardships. In contrast, Germany and the Netherlands ranked among the lowest in these areas.

Furthermore, the survey indicated a variation in access to care among the countries. Osborn and colleagues suggest that this disparity is likely due to differences in health insurance design and primary care organization and capacity. Cost-related access issues within the past year were reported by 33% of adults in the U.S., significantly declining from 37% in 2013; however, more U.S. adults still reported financial barriers to health care than any other country overall. Adults from Switzerland were second most likely to report financial barriers. Conversely, adults from Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom ranked among the lowest, with only 7% to 8% reporting financial barriers to health care.

“In comparison to adults in the other ten countries, adults in the United States are sicker and more economically disadvantaged,” Osborn and colleagues concluded. “The resulting challenge to the U.S. health system is compounded by higher health care costs, greater income disparities, and relatively low levels of spending on social services, compared to the other countries. On multiple fronts, the [Affordable Care Act] includes provisions that have the potential to improve the health and health care of Americans, including the most disadvantaged citizens. As U.S. health reforms gain further traction, they have the chance to close the gaps found in this survey. Improving the performance of the U.S. health care system, however, will require sustained commitment over the next decades.” – by Alaina Tedesco

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