

FACTORS AFFECTING PUERTO RICO'S HEALTH CARE

A healthcare system is something extremely complex. It is made of multiple networks at different levels. It is affected by many factors as: Demographic changes such as age and population distribution; economic factors such as poverty and unemployment; constant financial pressures on providers and insurances; exodus of healthcare professionals; technological and clinical advances; involvement of public policies through new laws and mandates that often complicate and increase costs of services; constant increase in cost medications; globalization of certain diseases, especially infectious ones; indifference on the part of many towards prevention and lifestyle improvements and many others.

It seems to me that in order to face the huge universe of factors impacting our healthcare system we should at least glance a little deeper into some of these contributing factors.

1. Demographic Changes:

There has been a tendency in the reduction of the population in Puerto Rico, which was markedly aggravated after hurricane María. From a general population of 3.7 m in 2010, at present it is estimated in 3.2 m. However, the most critical finding is the fact that the elderly population (65 years or more) has increased dramatically, from 546,884 in 2010 to 658,750 at present; while the pediatric population (less than 15 years) has decreased dramatically from 727,842 in 2010 to 523,966 at present.

This single tendency alone, has a real dramatic impact in our healthcare system. It has been well documented how the cost of healthcare services

for the elderly population keeps increasing year after year. Illnesses in that age group are more severe, complex and chronic. The services needed are more expensive.

In Puerto Rico, the problem worsens because, due to the exodus of younger generations, we are facing a rapidly increasing situation in which many elderly have no one looking out after them, resulting in dramatically long stays in hospitals. This social situation is costing hospitals great amounts of monies and, in most cases, there is nobody to pay for them. The social programs available are overcrowded and understaffed. On the other hand, the pediatric population is decreasing so fast that pediatricians and obstetricians are leaving the Island in impressive numbers. Even worse, the pediatric sub specialists are almost specimens in extinction.

All this indicates that the tendency for Puerto Rico is that it will become a highly geriatric population, without the badly needed younger human resources required to manage the productive aspects of our economy.

2 . Health Professional Resources:

Our healthcare professionals are rapidly migrating to the mainland. That includes physicians, nurses and technicians. Our general population are already suffering because of overcrowded medical offices, long waiting periods of time for appointments, overcrowded emergency rooms, fewer and fewer subspecialists. Even worse, some specialties are already extremely critical, for example, general surgery. At present we have only 221 general surgeons for a 3.2 million population of whom 60% are 65 years or older.

The reasons for these professionals' exodus are multiple, but more dramatic are the ridiculous salaries or revenues being paid to them, the lack of contracts for newcomers, the increasing load of bureaucratic work required from them, the number of frivolous lawsuits, and several other factors.

Since almost 80% of the existing population are covered under the government health plan or under Medicare or Medicare Advantage, that leaves only around 20% of the population which could be considered private patients. That number of patients is not enough to sustain our professionals in private practice.

3. Health Care trends for the future:

As time goes by we are living a fast-pace of changes in the way healthcare services are being provided, and still we are barely beginning.

Dramatic changes in technology, like robotics, genome, stem cells, telemedicine, etc., together with advances in new ways of treatments, like new medications, organ transplants, nanomedicine and others, are pushing hard for new ways of operation of hospitals and medical practices.

4. Financing the System:

Obviously, the key factor to manage the healthcare risks we have been talking about is financing. It is almost impossible to manage adequately a healthcare system in which about 80% of the population depends on limited state and federal funds.

How can we finance a system that receives only about 60% of the funds required for our Medicaid patients and 40% below what is required for Medicare Advantage populations when compared to the Mainland?

Because of these inequalities' physicians, nurses and other healthcare professionals are leaving the Island by thousands in search of proper and adequate reimbursements in the Mainland. The financial difference between here and there is so vast, that once they start working there, very few return.

This situation becomes very odd when you consider that our physicians, nurses, etc. have gone through the same required training processes and obtained national licenses to practice, the same as similar professionals in the states, yet they are treated differently.

Ours professionals are so competent that every year different organizations from the Mainland come to Puerto Rico to recruit these professionals directly. All this becomes more bizarre when we are talking about healthcare, one of the most important elements of the economic profile of our Island.

It is very important to realize that hospitals alone contribute with 45,000 direct and indirect jobs and \$5 billion dollars yearly to our economy. The average salary of our employees is around \$35,000 per year, not including physicians.

With our phony system, we never know what is going to happen. Outcomes are not predictable and that is what we call our healthcare system.

And so, what's next? How can we approach all these risks we have been talking about? Answer: It is not easy.

It is obvious the answer lies in two main players: providers of services and those responsible for the financing of such services.

Providers, mainly hospitals and physicians, need to realize that we are living a different ball game. A rapid look at the trends of providing services during the past few decades will vividly indicate to them where we are and where we are going. The dramatic advances in medicine are setting the new standards.

In the case of physicians, they will also need to adjust to all those trends. Among others, they need to understand what the new consumers of services are looking for: transparency, information, short waiting periods, emphasis on value-based purchasing and others. They need to understand the differences between members of different generations (Baby boomers, generation x and millennial).

Conclusion

No doubt, the main critical factor in all this equation is money. We, providers, and insurances know what to do. We know we have everything it takes to provide the best services possible. We have the talent, the best healthcare professionals available and, above all, a great desire to provide the quality of services required, but simply put, we do not have the monies needed. We are living that great reality.

The great challenge facing Puerto Rico hospitals is the fact that we are being forced to, either reduce costs at the expense of creating potentially devastating impacts on the communities served, or take less aggressive cost-cutting measures and risk facing severe financial hardships.

Due to the above, the responsible entities, aware or not, are forcing the actual performers of the system to embark in a continuous, absurd and unproductive fight among each other (providers, insurances, etc.) in order to survive.

This could be considered a disgrace and a flagrant violation of the primordial right of equality established in the Constitution.

If truth be told, it is really important that both, local and federal governments, realize that there is a great need to establish a fair reimbursement for services provided through “Vital” or Medicaid and through Medicare and Medicare Advantage programs. There is a great need to establish a reasonable fee-schedule, which could respond to the financial realities we are living. If this is not accomplished soon, our complete healthcare system will crash down because physicians and nurses will continue to leave the Island and more hospitals will have to close. At this rate, this does not seem far away.

We all need to be responsible and contribute to the wellbeing of the system. If the health care system fails, there is no way the financial system could recuperate.

Please understand that the problem is not the hospitals, the physicians or the insurances. The problem is lack of funds.

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