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Kid's health

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are insured.

"The nation's health continues to show record progress," the report stated, citing improvements in such areas as infant mortality rates. "(B)ut Americans with low income or less education aren't as likely as more educated or economically advantaged Americans to share in the good health news ..."

One agency that has tried to deliver good health news for poor children is Health Ministry Center of the Southern Tier, located on the grounds of the now-defunct St. Patrick's Parish in Corning. The center is run by an interfaith group of volunteers and is supported, in part, by All Saints Parish, comprising three Catholic churches in Corning and Painted Post; Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier; and the Diocese of Rochester's Consistent Life Ethic grant fund. The center provides free health services to the uninsured and underinsured.

Joyce Hyatt, a nurse practitioner who oversees the center, said children in poor families don't have to suffer unduly as long as their parents are educated in such good health practices as eating nutritious food and creating a calm, stable home life.

"Even poor parents can be ... effective if they know what they're doing," she said.

One mother's story

Tilesia Sandlin of Henrietta is a single mother with two healthy children — a daughter, age 2, and a son, age 15. All it took for them to stay healthy was for her to go bankrupt.

Sandlin, 33, is currently employed at a credit union, but said she was replaced at a previous job with a local marketing company while she was on maternity leave awaiting the birth of her daughter. While she was working for the marketing company, her employer covered the cost of her health insurance, including prenatal bills. Once she lost her job, however, she became responsible for paying premiums to the private health insurer that had contracted with her former employer.

Sandlin found it difficult to pay for her own health insurance, but decided to keep her policy until about one month after her daughter was born, and then switch to Medicaid, the federal health insurance program for low-income people. Various circumstances compelled her to wait until three months after the birth to apply. The brief gap in coverage proved to be costly.

After her daughter was born, she learned she had been mistaken in thinking



Pediatrician Lynn Garfunkel examines Rebekah Phelps' teeth June 27 at the Mercy Outreach Center.

that her private health insurance covered the cost of her daughter's care after birth. Then, right after her daughter's birth and just after her private health insurance policy expired, her son was playing in the family's back yard and was stung by a bee. He had an allergic reaction, including wheezing and swelling, and he had to be hospitalized. When all was said and done, she found herself with \$3,500 in medical bills.

"It's overwhelming ... overwhelming," she said, noting that she supported her family on unemployment benefits and savings while she looked for work, a process that took a year. She has since seen her car repossessed, and has had to declare personal bankruptcy because the expenses of supporting her children have made it impossible for her to pay back all her medical bills. She credited family members and a kind doctor who has given her some free medical care over the years for helping her through her hard times.

"I'm optimistic," she said. "I figured there'd be a way out if I kept digging at it."

Sandlin's story is just one version of what happens to parents when they must support their children on tight budgets and struggle to pay for their medical care. Sister Christine Wagner, SSJ, director of St. Joseph's Neighborhood Center in Rochester, has heard many such stories.

Typically, she said, someone, usually a mother, calls St. Joseph's and makes a pediatric appointment for "one child." However, when the mother shows up, she may have a total of four children in tow, none of whom have seen a physician for some time, Sister Wagner said. And sometimes the children are behind in their immunization shots schedule, she added.

St. Joseph's provides health care to low-income people as one of its many services, and its medical volunteers are more than willing to examine this mother's children. However, the center also tries to move beyond simply treating each child, and works on finding out from the mother why her children have no regular physician.

Sometimes, Sister Wagner said, a mother will say she had been going to a clinic, but was prohibited from going there anymore for one reason or another. Other times, a mother might say she was on Medicaid, but was no longer enrolled. She may say it's because she hasn't communicated with her social services caseworker. Or she may say trying to understand the procedures and paperwork necessary to stay on Medicaid just overwhelmed her.

If she is fleeing an abusive spouse or partner, health care may be the last thing on her mind, Sister Wagner added. Or she may be new to the area, and hasn't learned to navigate the system yet. Or, she may just be embarrassed to seek public assistance in the first place.

"Not only have you got a sick child or a child who needs health care, you've also got a fractured situation," Sister Wagner said. "Very often the parents are extremely frustrated or discouraged about having to take care of their kids."

Mercy Sister Kathleen Ann Kolb directs the Mercy Outreach Center in Rochester. Like St. Joseph's, the center provides free or low-cost medical care, and its visitors include the children of poor families. She noted that poverty can exacerbate what might be routine health problems for many children. For example, she said, a child with an ear infection that goes un-

treated because his or her parents lack health insurance can eventually develop hearing problems.

"By and large, there's a grave discrepancy between those who have money and those who have no health insurance in terms of chronic illness," she said.

Meeting the need

Both private and public initiatives in recent years have made headway in getting medical care and health insurance for poor children.

Sister Kolb said New York state's establishment of Child Health Plus in 1997 has helped to reduce the number of children who visit Mercy Outreach Center for medical care. Child Health Plus is designed for families who make too much money to qualify for Medicaid, yet are still unable to afford health insurance. In 1999, 26 percent of the center's patients were children, but that percentage has dropped to 19 percent as of this year. The center used to have a long waiting list for pediatric visits, but that list has been virtually eliminated, she said. The center has cooperated with Catholic Family Center in working to enroll families in Medicaid and Child Health Plus, she said.

Meanwhile, St. Joseph's Hospital in Elmira and St. James Mercy Hospital in Hornell have also been aggressive in helping families enroll in Child Health Plus, according to officials with both hospitals.

Mercy Sister Ann Miller, vice president for mission at St. James, said her hospital has trained people in its billing department to help families enroll in publicly funded insurance programs like Child Health Plus. Similar efforts have been undertaken at hundreds of Catholic health-care facilities across the nation, according to Children's Health Matters, a program of Catholic Charities USA.

Children's Health Matters highlighted St. Joseph's for similar efforts on its Web site (www.childrenshealthmatters.org), noting that the Elmira hospital offers enrollment services "on evenings and weekends to accommodate working families who are unable to apply during normal business hours."

Despite the rise in the number of families enrolled in Child Health Plus, many low-income children still fall through the cracks for one reason or another. And Catholic health institutions, which treat more poor people than any other health institutions nationwide, will continue to foot the bill when no one else — including the government — will. On that note, Sister Miller said: "If someone were to come here with their child, and they couldn't pay, they would not be turned away."

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