

## Nurses, Advocacy and the Impact of Healthcare Reform on Children

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The American public consistently rates members of the nursing profession as the most honest and ethical of all professional groups (Gallup Incorporated, 2012). This high degree of trust both enables and requires nurses to speak with a powerful voice and advocate for patients and families with local, state, and national leaders.

For example, pediatric nurses advocate for their patients by ensuring access to healthcare and helping to design policies that provide for children's well being in the community as they recover or live with chronic conditions. To do this, nurses must remain informed about updates in the multiple healthcare policy regulations that involve children within the healthcare system. In addition, nurses are invaluable in providing assistance to parents as they navigate the complexities and decisions that confront them when caring for ill or disabled children.

### SPN Committees and Advocacy Toolkit

SPN is committed to ensuring that nurses have the ability to influence a wide range of individuals and organizations. The child advocacy committee monitors legislative events and activities to keep the board and membership informed about mechanisms by which pediatric nurses can influence public policy at all levels. One initiative that the committee developed last year is an updated version of the online advocacy toolkit, which is designed to provide foundational information for nurses to use to begin advocacy work. The toolkit serves as a reference for nurses to become more sophisticated in their advocacy work as it provides specific information about health insurance, communicating with legislators, current child health issues, and resources for organizations supporting children in need. Ultimately, the goal of the advocacy toolkit and the child advocacy committee is to help nurses develop the skills to present child healthcare needs and parental concerns to those in positions of healthcare policy and political leadership.

One important area is the impact that the Affordable Care Act (ACA) has on how children and families access healthcare (United States Senate, ND). From various reports, including the Kaiser Family Foundation Health Tracking Poll (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2013a), there is definite confusion and misunderstanding by the public about the ACA. Studies show that patients and families will likely turn to physicians and nurses to help bridge this knowledge gap (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2013b).

The following section from the advocacy toolkit provides an explanation as to how the changes in the healthcare system affect children.

## SPN Advocacy Toolkit Revised

### Health Insurance for Children and Families

As nurses who desire to advocate for the health of children, it is vital that we recognize the importance that access to the healthcare system has on the ability to promote and enhance the health and well-being of children. Because our healthcare system and the way in which individuals access it are complicated and undergoing reformation, it is necessary for nurses to help parents understand how to utilize the existing system while preparing them for the changes that are occurring through healthcare reform under the Affordable Care Act (ACA).

#### Private Insurance

While many of the access and insurance issues are related to low-income families, consideration should also be given to the 60%–75% of children in the United States who are covered through a private, employer-provided insurance plan (Federal Interagency Forum on Child & Family Statistics, 2012). In general, private insurance provides a certain level of security for the family and guarantees access to the healthcare system, but insurance plans can be complex. For example, payment of claims can be a challenge, especially for hospitalization and for those with a chronic illness.

As nurses, we can advocate for the family by encouraging them to know their insurance benefits and rights, particularly how the claims process works for their specific plans. Because the majority of private insurance plans are provided by employers, the U.S. Department of Labor has engaged in a comprehensive health benefits education campaign (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). It is important that nurses understand this information in order to be a trustworthy resource and effectively advocate for the pediatric population.

#### Medicaid/Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)

For children who are not covered by private insurance and whose parent(s) meet income eligibility requirements, there are multiple state and federal options that are offered under the Medicaid/CHIP programs (Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured, 2013). These options vary based on the state that the family resides in, so reviewing the Website [insurekidsnow.gov](http://insurekidsnow.gov) would be a good start to understanding how the various state plans have been developed (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2012). In addition, The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation does valuable work in all aspects of health policy and research, and their 2012 report, "Health Coverage of Children: The Role of Medicaid and CHIP," gives an excellent overview of how these two programs impact healthcare options and accessibility.

#### Eligible but Not Enrolled

Although private insurance and government-funded Medicaid and CHIP programs are available to many, more than

8 million children in the United States still are not covered by health insurance. Approximately 5 million are eligible for coverage under either Medicare or CHIP, but various barriers to their enrollment prevent parents from establishing coverage for their children. Many of these issues and barriers are discussed in the 2010 Enroll America report “Consumer Voices: What Motivates Families to Enroll in Coverage?”

In addition, if you are interested in increasing your level or your organization’s level of involvement in this important outreach opportunity, learn about the 2012 US Department of Health & Human Service report “Connecting Kids to Coverage Challenge.”

### Affordable Care Act

In March of 2010, President Barack Obama signed into law the healthcare bill known as the ACA, setting into motion a series of laws that will result in changes as to how individuals and families obtain and use insurance coverage. From a nursing and healthcare perspective, current and future changes in healthcare must be understood to maintain our credibility as child and family advisors and advocates. Also, knowledge of these changes is necessary to identify potential new areas in which advocacy will be needed. Some important information is as follows:

- The Kaiser Family Foundation created the following Website introducing the public to the basics of the ACA: <http://healthreform.kff.org/the-basics.aspx>.
- Time-frames in which provisions of the ACA go into effect are available at <http://healthreform.kff.org/timeline.aspx>, and some important impacts of the new legislation on children can be found at <http://www.everychildmatters.org/news/603-much-to-celebrate-after-first-two-years-of-health-law->.
- For a more Medicaid and child-centered perspective, the Georgetown Center for Children and Families produced a paper in April 2010 entitled “Summary of Medicaid, CHIP, and Low Income Provisions in Health Care Reform.”

### Advocacy and Change

Healthcare reform and the ACA have already resulted in benefits for the populations that it affects but with any new system, these changes potentially expose new areas of advocacy needs. As can be seen below, there are both positive aspects and new issues arising from how these processes are changing delivery of care. One concern is that insurance policies offered through health exchanges do not consistently offer coverage for childhood screening and developmental services (Georgetown University Center for Children and Families, 2010). The following Websites provide resources for health professionals:

- Overall predicted benefits of the ACA: <http://www.dpc.senate.gov/healthreformbill/healthbill38.pdf>

- <http://HRSA.gov/AffordableCareAct/Toolkit.html>
- Role and functionality of health insurance exchanges and the enrollment process: <http://marketplace.cms.gov/> (Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, 2013)
- Kaiser Family Foundation report on how Medicaid, CHIP, and the ACA are potentially changing children’s access to health insurance: <http://kaiserfamilyfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/8445-key-lessons-from-medicaid-and-chip.pdf>
- Pew Charitable Trusts article on concerns about certain populations that previously received coverage and services: <http://www.pewstates.org/projects/stateline/headlines/the-acas-family-glitch-could-hurt-families-who-need-chip-85899506217> (Vestal, 2013)

The role of the nurse as advocate is done daily and reflects the responsibility nurses have to ensure that actions within the healthcare system are in the best interests of the child and family. The desired outcome is that children and families have the knowledge necessary to make collaborative decisions with their healthcare team. With the complex changes taking place, there is the potential to get left behind in terms of understanding the system and in receiving new or maintaining existing benefits. Because of the trust that patients and their families have in nurses, it is critical that nurses continue to increase their knowledge of the system and make it work for the well-being of children and families.

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