

Texas' Other National Championship: Unbeaten, Untied, and "Unproud" in Percentage of Uninsured

A January Rose Bowl victory secured the nation's top spot for the University of Texas Longhorn football team. The State of Texas also finds itself holding another national top spot – though one not as flattering. According to a U.S. Census March 2004 survey, an average of about 5.4 million Texans, or 24.6 percent of the state's population, were uninsured. It's a percentage that leads the nation.

Unfortunately, as the uninsured turn to more expensive means of receiving medical care (such as emergency room treatment), the uncompensated costs are passed onto local taxpayers and further drive up health insurance premiums for other consumers. As a result, healthcare costs increases for others lead to – you guessed it – a higher number of uninsured – and the spiral continues. Texas health plans remain committed to working with the Legislature to hand *this* national championship to another state.

What's Up? Healthcare Costs – But Do You Know Why?

A new PriceWaterhouseCoopers report, *The Factors Fueling Rising Healthcare Costs 2006*, attempts to explain the real reasons why healthcare costs are rising. According to this analysis, higher use of services account for 43 percent of the increase. These increases were driven by several factors including rising consumer demand, new and more intensive medical treatments, defensive medicine, as well as aging and unhealthy lifestyles.

Interestingly, the study revealed that despite increased utilization and higher costs, health insurance premiums are growing at a reduced rate. In addition, the efforts of health insurance plans are actually helping to ease drug cost increases. The study also pointed out that "current health plan trends to promote provider pay-for-performance, transparency, consumer engagement, and healthy lifestyles have the potential to mitigate future cost increases and address some root cost drivers. Other efforts to appropriately assess the emergence of new technologies and public reporting of quality measures across all members of the healthcare community would improve accountability throughout the healthcare system."

President: Transparency in Healthcare is Key for Consumers

President George W. Bush's State Of The Union Address included a comprehensive agenda to make health care in America more affordable. The President said he believes Americans deserve high-quality, reasonably priced, reliable health care, and the security of knowing they will have it when they need it. Included in the President's proposed agenda was the call to improve information available to consumers as they make their healthcare choices and before care is received.

In Texas, transparency in costs, measurements of provider performance as well as protections from balanced-billing are among the public policy considerations that will improve the public's standing in the healthcare market. Not only could these issues help drive down healthcare costs but they will also empower consumers to make informed choices while safeguarding them from unethical and illegal billing practices of certain providers.

As the President stated in his January 31st address, "Keeping America competitive requires affordable health care."

Texas Trivia

- Which nation's flag has flown consecutively over Texas the longest?
 - France
 - Spain
 - Mexico
 - United States
- Which is larger (according to square miles)?
 - Pennsylvania
 - The King Ranch
 - Texas 23rd Congressional District (Henry Bonilla)
 - England
- Texas was the ___ state to enter the Union?
 - 19th
 - 28th
 - 32nd
 - 45th
- Which county contains more species of birds than any other comparable area in North America?
 - Brazoria
 - Bexar
 - Bowie
 - Brazos
- Which Texas figure served longer in the U.S. Senate?
 - Phil Gramm
 - Morris Sheppard
 - Sam Houston
 - Rienzi Johnston

Health Care Records On Paper: 8-Track Technology in the I-Pod Age

While some may recall with nostalgic bliss the wonder of 8-track tapes, few of us still have (or are ready to go back to) this outdated method for hearing music. Technology has certainly evolved. But surprisingly in health care, a method older than 8-tracks – paper – is still being used to keep track of your health.

According to a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only 17% of all physicians currently use electronic health records. Hurricane Katrina survivors know the consequences of this antiquated paper system. Hundreds of thousands of paper medical records were destroyed leaving them with no clinical documentation of any kind. The Center for Health Transformation is working with state legislators to accelerate the adoption of healthcare information technology, noting such a move will ultimately save both lives and money.

Thanks to a measure adopted during the 79th Regular Session, a committee of healthcare leaders is exploring ways to increase the use of healthcare information technology. Such a move is intended to help reduce the cost of care and improve the efficiency of our healthcare system.

Helping Hand Spotlight: Medicaid Managed Care

Saving state tax dollars and delivering quality care

George Taylor*, 58, lives in a small, one-bedroom frame home in Houston. When he joined the Medicaid managed care program, his living conditions were appalling. He weighed more than 500 pounds, and hadn't walked in 15 years. All that changed with the help of his care program and the caring people at his health plan.

Having contracted polio as a child, George had congestive heart failure, high blood pressure, and an irregular heart beat. When his mother's health started to fail, there was no one else to bring him medicine, help him clean, or see to the other normal, daily activities.

In response, George's case manager assigned a full-time caregiver to help George with grooming, dressing, cleaning, picking up medicines, and even cooking. She secured a special hospital bed for George's home that was easier for him to utilize. The case manager also arranged for physical therapy to strengthen George's legs, so he could learn to walk again, and get in and out of bed by himself.

Additionally, his care coordinator helped to find a primary care physician to oversee George's healthcare, and assigned a nurse to monitor his health while teaching George and his caregiver about the diet and medical regime the doctor had prescribed.

It took a committed team of healthcare experts to restore George's independence and self-respect. To date, George has lost more than 200 pounds. He gets around by himself. He cleans and feeds himself. And he does one more thing that could never have been possible without the help from his health plan: He thinks more highly of himself.

*-patient's name has been changed

Trivia Answers:

1.b (1519-1685) 2.c (52,620.74 sq. miles) 3.b 4.a 5.b (1913-1941)

Birthdays

February

4 - Rep. Yvonne Davis
5 - Rep. Roy Blake, Jr.
5 - Rep. David Farabee
7 - Rep. Glenda Dawson
9 - Rep. Harvey Hilderbran
13 - Sen. Judith Zaffirini
15 - Rep. Elliott Naishtat
17 - Rep. Harold Dutton, Jr.
18 - Rep. Vicki Truitt
20 - Rep. Jerry Madden
20 - Rep. Robby Cook
21 - Rep. Dan Flynn
22 - Sen. Chris Harris
26 - Rep. Fred Brown
26 - Rep. Mike Krusee
27 - Rep. Tommy Merritt
29 - Rep. Phil King

March

1 - Sen. Kevin Eltife
3 - Rep. Dennis Bonnen
4 - Governor Rick Perry
5 - Sen. Kim Brimer
5 - Rep. Dan Branch
6 - Rep. Dora Olivo
7 - Sen. Juan Hinojosa
7 - Rep. Carl Isett
11 - Sen. Bob Deuell
11 - Rep. Jose Menendez
14 - Rep. Rene Oliveira
15 - Rep. Gary Elkins
17 - Rep. Patrick Haggerty
19 - Rep. Al Edwards
20 - Rep. Stephen Frost
20 - Rep. Linda Harper-Brown
20 - Rep. Jim Jackson
20 - Rep. Pete Laney
23 - Rep. Todd Smith

April

2 - Rep. Delwin Jones
4 - Rep. Craig Eiland
5 - Rep. Larry Phillips
6 - Rep. Rick Hardcastle
7 - Sen. Rodney Ellis
8 - Rep. Byron Cook
11 - Rep. Gene Seaman
17 - Rep. Alma Allen
20 - Rep. Jodie Laubenberg
21 - Rep. Helen Giddings
26 - Rep. Myra Crownover
27 - Rep. Robert Puente
28 - Rep. Paul Moreno