Physicians who treat the elderly in rural Florida: trends indicating concerns regarding access to care.

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Abstract

CONTEXT: Rural elderly patients are faced with numerous challenges in accessing care. Additional strains to access may be occurring given recent market pressures, which would have significant impact on this vulnerable population.

PURPOSE: This study focused on the practice patterns and future plans of rural Florida physicians who routinely see elderly patients. Additionally, we examine those who provide services to a high volume of Medicare (HVM) patients.

METHODS: A self-administered mailed survey was sent to rural physicians who identified themselves as practicing family medicine, internal medicine, psychiatry, general surgery, a surgical specialty, or a medical specialty. Questions examined changes in services offered by all rural physicians and among them, the HVM physicians. Impact of the professional liability insurance situation, satisfaction with current practice, and future practice plans on changes in service availability was also examined.

RESULTS: Overall, 539 physicians responded for a participation rate of 42.7%. Two hundred eighty eight (54.9%) of all physicians in the study indicated a decrease or elimination of patient services in the last year. HVM physicians, compared to low volume of Medicare providers, were significantly more likely to decrease or eliminate services overall (66% vs 45%, P =.001).
Mental health services (47% vs 18%, \( P = .001 \)), vaccine administration (39% vs 16%, \( P = .008 \)), and Pap smears (41% vs 13%, \( P = .008 \)) were more likely to be eliminated among the HVM physicians. HVM physicians were also significantly more likely to be somewhat or very dissatisfied (40% vs 23%, \( P = .012 \)) with their practice.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Physicians in rural Florida report dissatisfaction with their practice and are decreasing or eliminating services that are important to the elderly. Given the aging population and increasing need for health care services, these trends raise concern about the ability for these patients to receive necessary care.

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