

# Access to health care on Maui — where are we really at?

## THE CHAMBER VIEW

by Pamela Tumpap



On Maui, the issue of another hospital helped fuel discussion and debate about our access to medical care, an issue

of great concern to Maui doctors.

Recently, a national study reported that Hawaii does the best job of any state in ensuring its residents have access to health care. The Commonwealth Fund Commission on a High Performance Health System measured how states performed in 32 areas of health care between 2002 and 2005, and Hawaii came out first overall, with state officials crediting Hawaii's wide availability of health insurance through employment and state programs.

Helping to improve access to care are a number of state programs, such as the expanded state child-care health insurance program that dropped children's uninsured rate from 10 percent in 2000 to 5 percent in 2005; and the recently expanded health coverage for Medicaid-eligible

adults that includes preventive dental coverage.

And, let us not forget how our businesses and tremendously low unemployment help, with employees who work 20 or more hours per week receiving prepaid health coverage through employer-sponsored programs.

I think all would agree that "access to care" is an important issue. Yet, it's clearly not something the common person thinks about every day. However, many Maui doctors do, because they know the realities of the doctor shortage we face and the challenges that presents for patients in time of need.

This past Tuesday I had the pleasure of hearing a presentation by Dr. Linda Rasmussen, an orthopedic surgeon in Kailua, Oahu, and the Hawaii Medical Association (HMA) president. She pointed out that, "If we don't have doctors available to see people, what good does insurance do?"

Following the release of the national study, she and HMA have talked about how high malpractice premiums and low insurance reimbursements have created a "state of crisis" in Hawaii, with physician shortages limiting access to health care.

HMA notes that the study rat-

ing Hawaii as the No. 1 state in "access to care" is deceptive and misleading, because it ignores the number of physicians available to provide care.

Stephen C. Schoenbaum, the research branch executive vice president for programs at Commonwealth Fund, confirmed to HMA that the study does not include availability of physicians in the study's definition of "access to care."

As stated by Cathy Schoen, Commonwealth Fund senior vice president for research and evaluation, "Where you live matters for getting care when you need it, getting the right care and the opportunity to live a long and healthy life."

The Hawaiian Islands are, in fact, facing a serious doctor

shortage, preventing many patients from getting care when they need it. Neighbor Islands and rural Oahu are impacted most seriously — particularly in specialty and trauma care, according to HMA.

The concerns about access to care expressed by HMA were echoed Tuesday evening, with Maui doctors telling me stories about losing colleagues to the Mainland; our difficulty attracting new doctors with the high cost of housing, high insurance premiums, and low insurance reimbursements; and long patient waiting periods for treatment.

Doctors and HMA continue to seek tort reform (as does the Maui Chamber of Commerce) and fair reimbursements — concerns that got a lot of attention

this past legislative session, but no real reprieve.

The Maui Chamber of Commerce seeks to help remove barriers that hamper access to care. We support the provision to our entire community of coordinated and cost-effective health care services, including: additional hospitals; primary, urgent, emergent, acute and long-term care; and new health facilities provided by the private sector.

People often don't think about access to care until an issue arises. The question is, will we have prompt access to care when that happens? Therefore, more education is needed to help the public better understand the challenges we face, so we can work together to attract and retain quality physicians and create solutions that

improve health care for us all.

HMA currently is conducting a forum series throughout the state to highlight the lack of access to health care. Through this forum, attendees will hear from a panel of experts. To date, attendees have raised concerns that having health insurance does not guarantee that physician care will be available, and ideas have been discussed. HMA's Maui forum will be held Aug. 16 at The Dunes at Maui Lani at 5:30 p.m. Register for the free event at (888) 536-2792 or e-mail [mandy\\_wilcoxson@hma-assn.org](mailto:mandy_wilcoxson@hma-assn.org). Please join in to hear where we are really at with "access to care" and voice your opinion.

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