

# Network on Uninsured Clients Study

## Fact Sheet #2: Barriers to Accessing Healthcare

The Research Committee of the Women's College Hospital Network on Uninsured clients set out to capture the richness of experience and knowledge held by the Network's members. It conducted a "Qualitative Research Project on Health-Care Access for the Uninsured." The research findings were used to create four fact sheets. One of the concerns raised among network members is the barriers to accessing health care experienced by the uninsured and undocumented. The key barriers to access are overviewed here.

### Fear

Fear and distrust are significant barriers to access for the uninsured and undocumented. Fear of perceived authority figures, institutions, and government agencies (like hospitals and schools) keep the uninsured and undocumented population from seeking care; they need to feel safe before seeking out needed medical care. Fear is related to fear of deportation, fear of the cost of care, fear of being hooked into the system (which may be associated with mental illness), and fear or embarrassment or harassment due to their status. Fear is experienced differently by different groups in this population; individuals without status will experience more fear than those on the 3 month wait period, as the latter do not fear deportation. This fear can have negative impacts on the health of this population by leading them to delay seeking care (resulting in greater severity) or by causing stress, which will have negative health impacts.

### Cost

"... even if people don't know ... how much the cost is, just the fact that there might be a cost; and when we're talking about new immigrants who are coming with such limited money, are looking to build a new life, are looking for a job or looking for a home, or refugees who have literally come without any previous planning and not even have any savings or may not have brought their savings, it's really a difficult thing to ask for people to just access the care and not think about the consequences." (Interview Participant)

The cost barrier is closely associated with the fear barrier as it is often fear of that cost which creates a barrier to access. Both perceived and actual costs will act as barriers to accessing care.

### Knowledge/Information gaps

Several knowledge and information gaps exist that create barriers to accessing health care for the uninsured and undocumented population:

- > A lack of knowledge and information regarding services available to this population by both health care workers and the uninsured/undocumented population.
- > Miscommunications between different sectors within the health care system regarding who provides services and what is available to this population.

### Language, culture and discrimination

Language, culture and discrimination also act as barriers to accessing care. Language and culture can impede communication and act as a barrier to access. Discrimination is often related to discourses around who "deserves"

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care; individuals may be considered undeserving due to their immigration status, their race or culture, their mental health status or their economic status (homelessness). This discrimination creates a hierarchy of human worth which identifies some individuals as being more worthy of care than others.

“We have a lot of clients who are discharged prematurely who end up coming back here because they’re considered you know clients that ... the emergency room would prefer not to deal with, someone who’s homeless or under housed. We’ve had people ... walk out with IVs in their arms, and their colostomy bags, and in their wheelchairs and wheeled back over here... we’re working within a system that’s not very responsiveness in general to people who are considered ... difficult to deal with.” (Interview Participant)

There is also stigma attached to uninsured/undocumented individuals who may be seen by health care providers, the public and policy makers as taking advantage of the system. This stigma can lead to harassment and mistreatment of the uninsured and undocumented in health care settings.

### Other barriers

- > Funding cuts to programs.
- > Limitations and gaps in the current services available.
- > Structural barriers (i.e. transportation to health care centres), and
- > More general problems associated with the health care system (such as system complexity).

### Quality of Care

Related to barriers to accessing health care, the uninsured and undocumented population may also experience lower quality of care. Standards of care for this population may be compromised due to:

- > Physicians altering care plans for patients when they know patients have to pay out of pocket.
- > Limited access to the full range of health care services due to limitations in what community health centres can cover.
- > Limitations in what is covered under Interim Federal Health Coverage.
- > Early discharge from hospital.

For more information on the network and the research, please visit

<http://www.womenscollegehospital.ca/programs/network-on-uninsured-clients.html>

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