

# Network on Uninsured Clients Study

## Fact Sheet #1: Common Health Issues of the Undocumented and Uninsured

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 big issues raised by Network members are the many health problems facing this population. These include:

- > Cancer
- > Cardio-respiratory problems
- > Chronic diseases (heart disease, diabetes) and their associated co-morbidities
- > Communicable diseases (TB, HIV)
- > Dental issues
- > Digestive problems, including weight loss/gain
- > Foot problems
- > Gynaecological issues and Obstetrics
- > Mental health problems
- > STIs and sexual health issues
- > Infected wounds
- > Occupational health problems (both acute and chronic)

The two most prominent health issues identified for this population were mental health issues and health issues around pregnancy.

### Mental Health Issues

Mental health problems identified in our interviews include a variety of disorders such as: depression, anxiety, suicidality, post traumatic stress disorder, addiction and stress. Mental health issues were cited as being the most prevalent health issue encountered by some participants. Stress and social isolation that accompany an individuals' status and the stress associated with being a new immigrant to Canada are compounded by the fear of being unable to access care when it is required. Stress can have a significant impact on the health of an individual, leading to additional illness and additional stress. Some individuals who are fearful of organizations they perceive as representing authorities may tend to isolate themselves and avoid accessing care when required. This social isolation can also impact on the health of individuals.

### Pregnancy and Women's Health

Pregnancy is a frequent concern to Network members because of the barriers experienced by women attempting to access pre-natal care. Women would often wait to access care until late in their pregnancy due to the expense of care and the fear of being deported even though there are some formal and informal agreements for care in place. Some hospitals and community health centres (CHCs) set out a flat fee for labour costs, although this may not cover the cost of complications; partnerships have been developed between midwives providing free pre-natal care and CHCs covering some of the hospital costs (including diagnostic tests and specialist referrals). Waiting to access care means that women miss important screening tests which could help prevent complications for the mother and/or baby during and after birth. Barriers to access may also lead women to seek unregulated care or have unattended births which could be very risky for both mother and child.

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“... one of the biggest issues is that women aren’t accessing prenatal care or aren’t accessing prenatal care as early as they should be.” (Interview Participant)

Other health issues and challenges faced by women include:

- > Gynaecological and hormonal issues.
- > Additional challenges and vulnerabilities related to women’s place in society.
- > The potential to fall victim to abusive relationships, which is a serious concern for uninsured and undocumented women as their fear of deportation (should their status be reported or discovered by police or authorities) may prevent them from seeking help or leaving the abusive relationship.

### Severity

Individuals without insurance/documentation have been observed to present with more severe illnesses at all points of health care access (i.e. CHCs or hospitals). The uninsured/undocumented population will often delay seeking care and so will present with more severe health issues, some of which could have been avoided. This population may only seek care in emergency situations, particularly temporary migrant workers who cannot take time off to address health concerns until it is life threatening.

“I suppose the problem is the people without insurance may ... not go anywhere until their conditions have become quite quite serious; and they, they go to hospital because of that... I think the hypothesis at this point is that people are presenting with more severe illnesses because you know they put off going to see a physician by the time they actually do go see a physician it’s at a higher level of acuity ... then if they’ve gone before.” (Interview Participant)

Severe health issues identified by participants include:

- > Unmanaged chronic diseases
- > Infected wounds, and
- > Late stage cancer.

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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