

A Perspective on Eye Care: The Impact of Health Care Reform



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When it comes to change, some people readily embrace new ideas. Others critically analyze things and resolve all concerns before making a decision on the proposed change. Still others vehemently oppose and fight against anything labeled “new.”

We have seen all three reactions to the discussions on reform of America’s health care system and the possibility of universal care or public health programs.

While much attention has centered around the effects of proposed changes on medical care, very little has focused on how ancillary health services, such as eye care, may be impacted by reform. In this article, we will examine the current state of eye care in the United States as compared to the United Kingdom, which has a nationalized health care system. Consider the following statistics:

AMERICA’S VISION CONCERNS

Adults – National population statistics reveal that 305 million people currently live in the United States. Of this group, approximately 47,840 individuals each year experience the early stages of sight loss, mainly due to one of the following conditions:

- 4.6 million over the age of 40 are visually impaired or blind.
- 2 million ages 50 or older have been diagnosed with macular degeneration.
- 22 million ages 40 or older have cataracts.
- 4.5 million over age 40 have diabetic retinopathy.
- 2.3 million over 40 have glaucoma.
- 44 million over age 40 have myopia or hyperopia.

U.S. eye care professionals believe that sight loss prevention begins with early detection of potential problems. They recommend the following comprehensive examination schedules – for ages 20 to 30, every two years; establishment of a baseline status exam at age 40; and thereafter a comprehensive eye exam every year. (*National Eye Institute*)

According to Prevent Blindness America, the economic impact of vision problems in the U.S. is \$51.4 billion. This is primarily due to reduced employee productivity and performance at work; medical costs associated with treatment; or sick days taken for illness, treatment, or follow up care for vision issues.

Children – These vision problems create attention and performance issues for kids at school and home:

- More than 12.1 million school-age children (or 25 percent) have vision impairment. Among preschool kids, more than one in 20 has a vision problem that could result in permanent sight loss if left untreated.
- The most common types of eye problems are myopia (nearsightedness), strabismus (crossed eyes), or amblyopia (lazy eye).
- Common causes of blindness among children are congenital cataracts, retinopathy of prematurity, and other complications due to premature birth.

A child's eyes should be checked immediately after birth, with a comprehensive exam by age three and again at age five when entering school, and thereafter every one to two years. (*National Eye Institute*)

A VALUED SENSE

According to the National Eye Institute, Americans rate sight as the one sense they value the most and do not want to lose.

Research indicates that Americans with eye care insurance tend to schedule regular appointments with their eye care physicians for wellness examinations. Unfortunately, only 40 percent have access to eye care insurance plans through their employers.

People without insurance often wait until they experience a vision problem before contacting their eye doctor. By that time, the disease may be advanced and difficult to reverse or cure.

It is important to note, though, that the quality of vision care in the U.S. is excellent, and many insurance plans place few restrictions on the frequency of visits. If most U.S. employers would offer employees and their families access to care by making vision benefits available, a large number of Americans would receive the regular comprehensive eye exams and treatment they need to protect and preserve their eyesight.

EYE CARE ISSUES IN THE U.K.

The United Kingdom's nationalized health care plan provides basic or "sick" coverage only; citizens may purchase supplemental insurance for additional coverage of health needs.

Britons, like Americans, value their sight, as identified by Transitions Optical in a Healthy Sight Survey (June 2009). Nearly 93 percent of individuals said they fear going blind more than they fear a heart attack or dying prematurely. Yet at least 25 percent believe they only need to see an eye doctor when they have a noticeable vision problem.

Adult eyesight statistics – According to recent reports, at least 60 million people live in the U.K.

Every day, 100 Britons start to lose their sight, reports the Royal National Institute of Blind people (RNIB). The RNIB estimates that more than 2 million have significant sight loss; however, since the majority of older citizens are not in regular contact with eye care services, records are not available on the severity of sight problems in the U.K.

Health officials believe that many more individuals have eye concerns that are treatable, but are not being addressed, and therefore Britons are unnecessarily losing their vision.

Here is a list of eye health issues:

- Over 50 percent of all sight problems may be due to untreated refractive issues or cataracts. The RNIB projects that by 2050, nearly 40 million Britons will have sight loss.
- Glaucoma – the RNIB estimates that 500,000 Britons are at risk of losing their sight due to this health concern.
- Diabetes retinopathy – approximately one-half million individuals in the U.K. have diabetes; of this group, nearly 26 percent do not receive retinal screenings for retinopathy. (Diabetes U.K.)
- Macular degeneration – at least 500,000 individuals in the U.K. have macular degeneration; another 250,000 are registered as partially or completely blind due to this disease.
- Blindness or vision impairment – nearly 400,000 Britons are registered with this problem (2006); 82 percent are ages 50 years and above.

The RNIB believes the cost to the U.K. for eye disease and sight lost is at least \$10.6 billion due to lost productivity and sick days for illness associated with eye diseases, which is having a dramatic negative impact on the country's economy.

KIDS AT RISK

- Vision professionals believe at least 25,000 kids in the U.K. are currently experiencing sight problems.
- U.K. preschoolers routinely receive vision screening, but there are no specific recommendations for testing school-age children. Some areas of the country offer visual acuity and color vision tests in older children and teenagers. Eye examination tests are free to kids ages 16 and younger.

CONCERNS ABOUT HEALTH CARE RATIONING

In recent years, the U.K. has seen considerable argument and controversy related to health care rationing. There are reports of limited access to drugs for medical care, with availability sometimes determined by a postage code lottery.

There are also media reports of the National Health System (NHS) refusing potentially sight-saving drugs to individuals with macular degeneration and other serious eye diseases, until the vision in one eye is gone. Since drug treatment options are expensive, the NHS believes it must limit the number of individuals who receive care. If approval is received, individuals may wait several months before receiving appropriate care and treatment.

In response to medical professionals' concerns about Britons' sight loss issues, the NHS is emphasizing the importance of wellness lifestyles to eliminate sight-damaging habits, such as smoking and excessive alcohol consumption. They also recently introduced a screening program to evaluate residents' health concerns, including sight problems, and provide a report on treatment options.

FOREWARNED IS FOREARMED

Most Americans understand that the U.S. health care system is not perfect. There are many perplexing health care delivery and education issues, and not everyone has access to the quality of care or services needed.

It is important to carefully analyze the options considered for health care reform to determine whether the proposed changes will result in the quality of care, access to services and treatments, and freedom of choice we need and expect. These questions deserve an investment of time to ensure plans are crafted thoughtfully and are in the best interests of Americans.

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