Health Policy
NEWSLETTER

Vol. 22, No. 2 | **JUNE 2009**

Jefferson Students' Improving Knowledge of Issues in Health Policy

Annual expenditures on health care in the US exceed $2 trillion.[1] The organization and financing of the healthcare system have a major impact on the practice of medicine, patients' expectations, and outcomes. How well do Jefferson Medical College (JMC) students understand the US healthcare system at the beginning of their medical education? Has this changed over time? How does this compare to students in the Master of Public Health (MPH) program?

A recent national survey of medical students identified gaps in their knowledge of important issues facing the US healthcare system.[2] Using the audience response system, 13 selected multiple-choice items from the national survey were administered to first-year JMC students on the first day of a series of lectures introducing the organization and financing of the US healthcare system and to MPH students enrolled in PH 508: Health Policy – An International Perspective. Table 1 offers a sample of the exam items, while Table 2 provides a summary of the results.

While this type of casual sample is certainly not conclusive, it appears that there is a trend of improving scores. JMC students performed better than their national peers in 2005, 2006, and 2007. JMC students in the fall of 2008 and Jefferson MPH students who responded to the same items in January 2009 scored substantially better than their peers from the earlier years.

How well did the students perform on specific items? In 2005-2007, almost 40% of JMC first year students incorrectly believed that the United States has a lower infant mortality rate than any other nation in the world. In the fall 2008 and January 2009 exam, 80% of both JMC and MPH students responded correctly. On the item asking about health care spending, by 2008, over 90% of students knew that the US spends more per capita on health care than any other country in the world.

When asked to estimate the approximate number of people in the US without health insurance, two-thirds of the MPH students knew that the correct response is between 40 and 50 million; less than 50% of the most recent class of JMC students responded correctly. In earlier years JMC students

Table 1: Student Knowledge Exam Items

True or False

1. The United States has a higher life expectancy than any other nation in the world.
2. The United States has a lower infant mortality rate than any other nation in the world.
3. Government-administered health insurance (e.g., Medicare) requires more money per person for administrative costs than private health insurance.
4. The United States is the only industrialized nation in the world not to guarantee access to health care for all of its citizens.
5. The United States spends more per person on health care annually than any other nation in the world.
6. People without health insurance are less likely to have a regular source of medical care.
7. People without health insurance are more likely to suffer from avoidable hospitalizations for diseases such as asthma and diabetes mellitus.
8. People without health insurance are more likely to suffer from delayed diagnoses for diseases like cancer.
9. Most individuals without health insurance are in families where no one works.
10. Raising the cost of co-payments or deductibles does not affect whether patients will go see their doctor.
11. The number of uninsured individuals in the United States increased over the last decade.
12. Where, approximately, did the United States rank, out of 191 countries, in a 2000 World Health Organization (WHO) report on "health systems performance?"
    a. Near first place
    b. Near 10th place
    c. Near 20th place
    d. Near 30th Place
    e. Near 40th place
13. How many uninsured people are there in the United States today?
    a. Fewer than 10 million
    b. 10 to 20 million
    c. 20 to 30 million
    d. 30 to 40 million
    e. 40 to 50 million
    f. Over 50 million

How did you score? Test your knowledge. See next page for the answers.

Table 2: % Correct Responses on Selected Items Concerning the US Healthcare System

Results from national survey published in *Academic Medicine*	Jefferson Medical College – 1st year students				Jefferson MPH students
	Fall 2005	Fall 2006	Fall 2007	Fall 2008	Jan 2009
68%	72%	72%	73%	79%	80%

Note: There were 21 student respondents from the MPH class. The JMC entering class size is 255. Not all students were in attendance and not all responded to every item.

had even more significantly underestimating the number of people without health insurance. In all years, almost all of our students did demonstrate an understanding of some of the consequences of lack of health insurance such as not having a regular source of care, having avoidable hospitalizations for diseases such as asthma and diabetes mellitus, and delayed diagnosis of cancer.

Why have the scores improved over time? Perhaps all the attention paid to healthcare in the fall 2008 presidential campaign heightened our students' knowledge of some of the important issues facing the US healthcare system. Hopefully, proposed reforms to the US healthcare system will make the current exam items obsolete. ■

Daniel Z. Louis, MS
Research Associate Professor, Family and Community Medicine
Managing Director, Center for Research in Medical Education and Health Care
Jefferson Medical College

Student Knowledge Exam: Correct Responses

(1) False (2) False (3) False (4) True (5) True (6) True (7) True (8) True (9) False (10) False (11) True

(12) *e. Near 40th place* (13) *e. 40 to 50 million*

REFERENCES

1. Catlin A, Cowan C, Hartman M, Heffler S, and the National Health Expenditure Accounts Team. National health spending in 2006: A year of change for prescription drugs. *Health Affairs*. 2008; 27(1): 14-29.
2 Agrawal JR, Huebner J, Hedgecock J, Sehgal AR, Jung P, Simon SR. Medical students' knowledge of the U.S. health care system and their preferences for curricular change: A national survey; *Academic Medicine*. 2005; 80(5):484-488.