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Report Says Plan Could Hurt AIDS Care

By ESTHER B. FEIN

In a report scheduled for release tomorrow, advocates for people infected with H.I.V. argue that the patients could suffer serious health consequences by being pushed into Medicaid managed care. Almost none of the doctors in New York City's managed care network have experience in treating people with the virus or AIDS, the advocates say.

About 25,000 New Yorkers with H.I.V. or AIDS, most of them women and children, would be forced into health maintenance organizations if New York City gets the Federal government's approval this month to make managed care mandatory for nearly all the city's Medicaid recipients.

"If these people are forced into managed care plans it may well result in significant morbidity or mortality because we don't have the proper services in place," said Dr. Victoria L. Sharp, medical director of the Spellman Center for H.I.V.-Related Diseases at St. Clare's Hospital in Manhattan. Most patients with AIDS or H.I.V. are now treated by clinics or individual doctors who are reimbursed by Medicaid on a fee-for-service basis.

The city's fledgling Medicaid managed-care network has been criticized for having too few doctors to treat the rapidly expanding numbers of patients it is enrolling. But advocates for people with AIDS said that given their pressing and special health care needs, the shortage of doctors experienced in treating the human immunodeficiency virus, which leads to AIDS, within the Medicaid managed care system was especially critical. They will present the results of the new survey in a meeting with Federal and state health officials tomorrow.

The survey by the Women's Advocacy Group of Housing Works, a not-for-profit organization serving people with AIDS and H.I.V., found that 95 percent of the Medicaid managed-care plans in the city could not refer callers to a primary care doctor with experience treating H.I.V. and AIDS.

The survey, which used volunteers, mostly H.I.V.-positive women, to call the doctors in the city's managed care network, was meant to duplicate the women's experience under the new plan. And the women who conducted the survey said they were appalled -- not only by the shortage of qualified

doctors -- but also by their dismissive attitudes.

"Many of the doctors were impolite and arrogant," said Juanita Chesnut, a 37-year-old Housing Works client, who is H.I.V.-positive and lives in Chelsea with her two children, who have tested negative for the virus.

"One doctor told one woman that if she had the infection, she was going to die anyway, so it didn't matter too much what doctor she got," Ms. Chesnut said, adding that the woman became hysterical.

Representatives of Housing Works and other members of the New York City Task Force on Medicaid Managed Care will meet tomorrow with federal officials, who must decide by Oct. 31 whether to grant New York City's request for a waiver so they could mandate managed care for most Medicaid recipients. About 20 percent of the city's 136,000 H.I.V.-infected patients would be affected.

Housing Works' attorneys said they intend to argue that since people with AIDS and H.I.V. are protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act, they should be exempted from any mandated Medicaid managed care plan in the city.

Michelle Vruwink, director of the Mayor's Office of Medicaid Managed Care, and Ronald S. Johnson, the citywide coordinator for AIDS policy, did not return phone calls yesterday asking for comment.

Other advocates for people with AIDS and H.I.V., and health care workers who treat them, said that to require managed care for this population of Medicaid recipients could be to pass an early death sentence for many.

"In order to provide appropriate care for H.I.V.-infected patients there's got to be a critical mass of patients one takes care of," Dr. Sharp said.

She compared the position of an H.I.V.-infected patient seeking a doctor to that of a heart patient looking for a surgeon to do coronary bypass surgery. "Would you go to the surgeon who does two operations a year," she said, "or the one who does 200?"

Dennis De Leon, a former City Commissioner for Human Rights who is executive director of the Latino Commission on AIDS, said that providers of AIDS services were trying to form their own managed care groups but that such a plan was at least two years away.

"This situation is critical for AIDS patients," he said, urging that such patients be exempted from any mandatory plans. Tanya Ehrmann, a case manager at Housing Works and one of the survey coordinators, added, "If someone with H.I.V. can't even get basic information from these plans, how are they going to get competent care?"

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